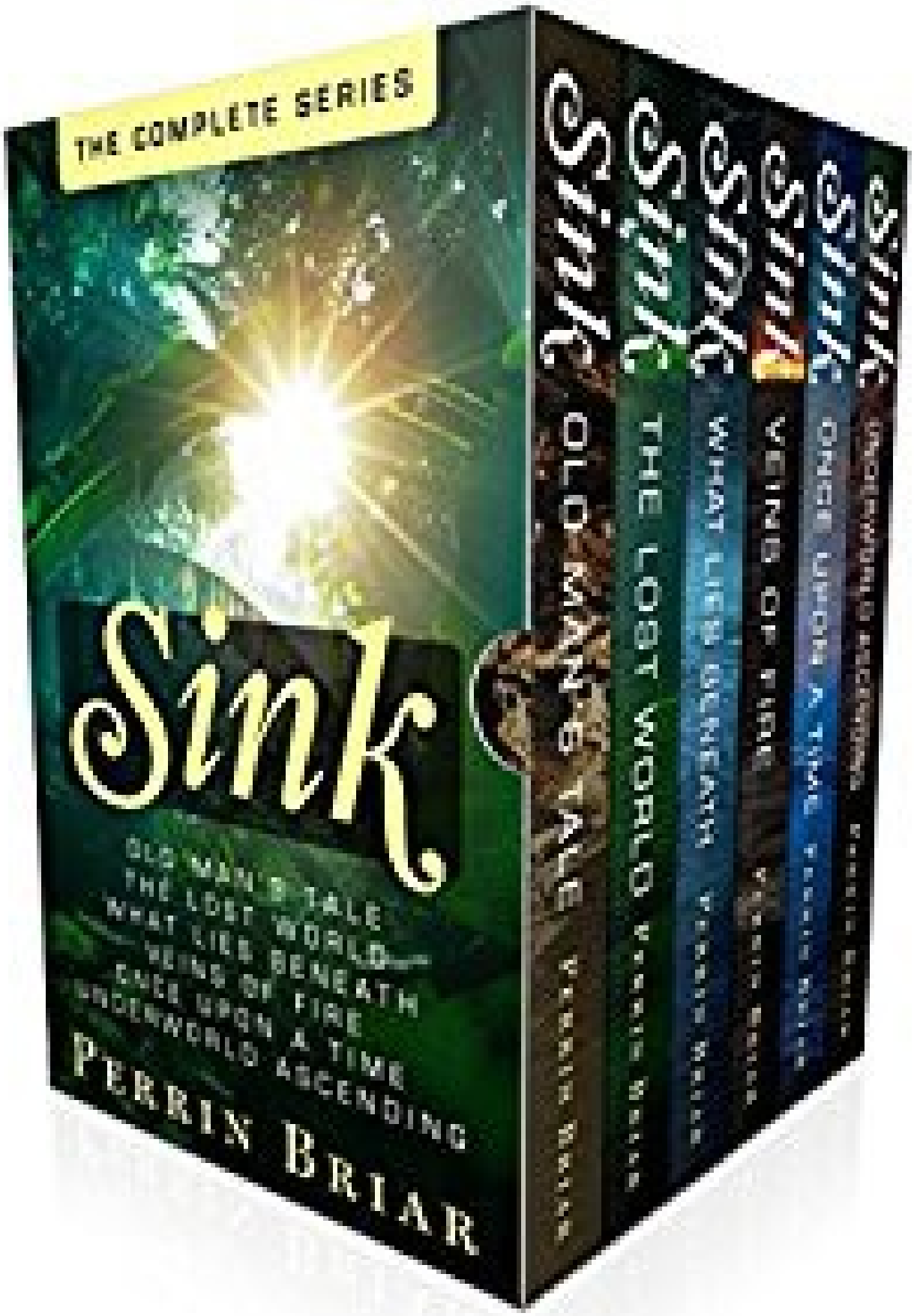
THE COMPLETE SERIES
Sink
OLD MAN'S TALE
THE LOST WORLD
WHAT LIES BENEATH
VEINS OF FIRE
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PERRIN BRIAR

# SINK

Old Man’s Tale
The Lost World
What Lies Beneath
Veins of Fire
Once Upon A Time
Underworld Ascending

Perrin Briar

# Old Man’s Tale

# Prologue

HIS FOOTSTEPS kicked up small wisps of dust that swirled about his feet. His shadow flickered with movement on the craggy rock wall, cast by the flaming torch held in his rigid right hand. The flame dripped like thick honey, leaving a trail of fiery breadcrumbs. The fire hissed as the man turned to look first down one tunnel, and then another. He was panting, out of breath. The darkness was cold and indifferent to his desperation.

He had a mustache, thick and bushy over his top lip, and wore the tatty clothing of someone who hadn't changed in weeks. He studied the palm of his hand. A series of lines crossed it in blue ink. He pressed his finger at a junction where three of the lines met and ran it along one particular tunnel, toward an image of a star. The man looked up.

Shapes had been chipped into the walls. This one showed a water droplet with an arrow pointing left. That one a square with an arrow pointing up. Another showed a star, like you'd see glinting off a gemstone, with an arrow pointing right. The man smiled. He was going the right way. He took a step forward and then froze, stock still.

He turned to look back at the tunnel he had come from. The darkness was impenetrable to the eye. But to the ear, he heard nightmares. He listened intently, and then heard it again. Whispers. It could have been the sound of wind whistling across the edge of a sharp rock, but he knew better. There was no draft down here.

He ran down the tunnel on his right, toward the star. The heat from the torch brought beads of sweat to his face. The flickering flames put on a shadow puppet show of demons. Or perhaps it wasn't a show. Perhaps they were real.

He stumbled, stepping into a deep recess. Pain shot up his ankle, into his knee. He took another step, this one making him flinch. He'd twisted his ankle. He cursed himself.

*Chatter chatter chatter.*

The whispering grew louder, like a rising tide in the dead of night. The man kept going, limping down the tunnel. Then he realized he had the glowing ball of flame in his hand. He would be easy to see. And though he loathed to lose the light, he needed to even the odds. He peered at the lines on his palm, memorizing which direction he needed to go. But his sweat

had smudged the ink, making the map all but illegible. He tossed the torch aside and stamped on it with his worn shoes.

The tunnel was thrown into darkness. Nothing but his breaths and his fear filled the void. His shoes made scuffing noises. He felt along the tunnel's cold hard surface, taking left after right, as far as his memory could serve him.

The whispers had quietened. But now he was hopelessly lost. He felt along the wall. His fingertips came to a material softer than the harsh rocks that tore at his skin. He felt the grooves of the shovel marks. It had recently been dug. He knew then he was heading in the right direction, and his heart swelled with hope.

The whispering grew louder, now all around him.

Then a whistling sound, followed by a *clack!*

Something skimmed off the ground at his feet. He felt the air disturbance as the object flew past his ankle. The man's eyes widened and he turned to look back at the darkness. A mistake. He shouldn't stay still.

*Clack!*

This one struck the wall just left of his ear. He felt the wall vibrate where it had struck so close.

*They found me. And they missed. Twice.* He knew he wouldn't get another chance.

He turned and ran, ignoring the pain in his ankle. More objects whistled and smacked into the tunnel walls. *Clack, clack, clack!* One struck him on the lower back, the pain instant, sharp, and excruciating. But the weapon did not work as intended – it was meant to trap and ensnare limbs, not the trunk, which was too wide. He changed direction, knowing they would aim again for the same location.

His mind went to those who had helped him. Had one of them blabbed to the guards? Had one of them broken their promise? Or had he simply been unlucky and been spotted at some point? Or perhaps the trail of fiery breadcrumbs had given him away? His heart went to those who had helped him. He hoped their fate was better than the one awaiting him.

The chattering grew louder still, until it sounded like an angry hive of killer bees inside his skull. He wanted to scream, but couldn't afford to give his position away. *As if they don't already know.*

He ran faster through the tunnels, now taking them at random. He knew now he would not find what he had been looking for. All he could do was

try to escape, and then perhaps later, when he was safe, he could stumble around the great catacombs, until either his body or his will was broken.

He took another random tunnel. The whispers died and the clacking objects stopped. The mustached man was exhausted. He slowed to a walk, his hands over his head to expand his lungs. His breaths wheezed from his throat.

He leaned against a wall, and his fingers fell into a deep recess there. It was a straight line. It met another straight line, and another. He felt at it. It was the shape of a star. Beside it, an arrow pointing straight ahead.

*I can make it*, the man thought. *I can make it!*

He didn't even hear the clack this time. It flew from the darkness and wrapped around his ankles. He fell forward, his impressive weight taking the fall hard. He pulled against the cord, but the darkness made it impossible. Another swirling noise groaned and wrapped around his feet and one of his hands.

He was doomed.

"No…" the man said. "No! Let me go! Please!"

The whispers grew louder, unbearable, as the figures approached. Though the man couldn't see them, he sensed them standing around him. Ogling. He shouted in nonsense syllables, not in pain or fear, but out of loss, out of knowing he would never see his loved ones again, knowing he was doomed to live in this world for the rest of his life. He was so close to getting out that he could almost taste it. He sobbed as the figures picked him up and carried him back down the tunnel, deeper and deeper into the Earth.

# Chapter One

THE RED DESERT flitted past like the surface of Mars, every bit as hostile, if not as bleak. The Outback was home to a surprising amount of life, not least snakes, which lay bathing across the tarmac road. The driver made no attempt to avoid the hapless creatures, and in fact only seemed to veer toward them whenever he spotted them, his lip curled up in satisfaction with each rendered reptile.

Graham Turner sat in the passenger seat, peering outside mostly because he couldn't stand to listen to the man in the driving seat talk incessantly and without restraint. Not everyone should be allowed freedom of speech.

Graham let himself listen to what Mr. Pearson was saying for a moment to see if it required him to respond anytime soon.

"…but that was when I realized I was onto a winner," Mr. Pearson said, "because what he failed to notice was how good I am at performing when the odds are against me…"

Nope. He was still in full boasting mode. Soon his fat head wouldn't be able to fit inside the car. Listening to his boss was bad enough, but in the backseat was the biggest suck-up the Righteous Brothers (the property development company they worked for, not the crooners) had ever produced, and they had produced some prodigious brown noses in their time.

Mr. Pearson slowed in his spiel as a snake made the mistake of raising its head from the tarmac. There was a moment of silence, and it was heaven. Graham gloried in it, made bittersweet by the knowledge it would end soon. Shame the snake had to fit the bill.

The road rushed beneath them, and the engine roared. And like clockwork, Mr. Pearson opened his fat mouth. But this time he asked a question, letting the dialogue become a real conversation.

"Where are you from, Dwayne?" Mr. Pearson said to the guy in the back.

"Cairns, sir," Dwayne said.

"Cairns, ay?" Mr. Pearson said. "Good people, the Cairnites."

"I like to think so, sir," Dwayne said.

He always answered with 'sir'. He'd do well at Righteous Brothers.

“Graham,” Mr. Pearson said. “You’re from these parts, aren’t you?”

So that was why he had brought Graham along. Graham did wonder. No one got on well with the boss, Graham even less so than the others. It had surprised him his boss would want to spend any amount of time in a confined space with him. Now he knew why. Mr. Pearson needed him.

“I am,” Graham said. “I left during high school.”

“Must feel strange, being back here after all these years,” Mr. Pearson said.

“Not at all,” Graham said.

In fact, his skin crawled. It was like he’d inadvertently returned to a hated restaurant, only realizing it after ordering the same noxious meal that’d made him quit the restaurant in the first place.

“It’s like returning home,” Graham said.

“We’re going to go see a fella called Jeremiah Witness,” Mr. Pearson said. “Ever heard of him?”

Now there was a blast from the past. Jeremiah Witness. No wonder the boss had been so cloak and dagger about the whole excursion. Jeremiah was a vague shadow in Graham’s memory, but the shadow had a smile, was easy going. Jeremiah would probably listen to their offer, although if they were going to see him in person that meant he hadn’t heeded their numerous letters and phone calls.

“Vaguely,” Graham said.

“A small place like this, I suppose you must all know each other,” Mr. Pearson said. “Living in each other’s trousers.”

*It’s pockets, you idiot. Living in each other’s* pockets. Mr. Pearson looked pleased with himself. As always, for no good reason. Graham wondered if he’d made the error on purpose as some misguided attempt at humor.

“Cairns is similar to Alice Springs in that regard,” Dwayne said.

He sat in the middle seat, legs splayed wide open, taking up all three cushions.

“You’re right, sir,” he said. “People in these places, they all know each other.”

“All their secrets,” Mr. Pearson said. “I heard some disturbing rumors about old Jeremiah Witness. Some *very* disturbing rumors.”

“What rumors?” Graham said.

“I heard he slaughtered his own wife and then buried her somewhere in the Outback,” Mr. Pearson said. “The police never found her body. It was probably eaten by wild animals, they said.”

He shivered in his leather seat.

“The things some people do,” he said.

Graham couldn’t believe that. Jeremiah used to come armed with a menu checklist every Sunday morning to take the kids’ orders. Mrs. Witness would then make a huge breakfast for each of the kids. They were fun times, happy times. Some of the best from Graham’s childhood, now he thought about it. His parents had left Alice Springs to escape their problems, only when they arrived in their new city of residence they realized they’d brought the problems with them. There was no running from the kind of person you were.

The road took a turn, onto a dusty backroad. It was bumpy and the sporty Mercedes saloon did not take them well. Sycamore trees lined either side, and the memories came flooding back.

Graham had a reasonable childhood. It was full of all the usual comings and goings of random memories, compounded by time and fragmented by rising and falling fads. His days at the Witness household were among his favorite. But he wasn’t looking forward to seeing Jeremiah Witness again. It was like returning to see a girlfriend you had abandoned, only now you needed to ask her a favor.

They had passed through Alice Springs twenty minutes earlier and hadn’t seen more than two or three houses. The Mercedes was a stark contrast to the beaten-up pick-up parked outside a rundown shack. The white washed walls were dirty with red dust.

Mr. Pearson waved his arm at the empty space of the Outback around them.

“This will all be prime development land,” he said. “Over one hundred acres. Worth millions once it’s developed. Breathe it in, lads. Breathe it in. Can you smell it?”

“Yeah,” Graham said, coughing and clearing his lungs. “Dust.”

“It’s not dust,” Mr. Pearson said. “Dwayne, tell him what you smell.”

“Money, sir,” Dwayne said. “Redevelopment money.”

“That’s right,” Mr. Pearson said. “See? Dwayne here, he’s got the nose. That’s something they can’t teach.”

Larapinta had fallen within the growing suburbs of Alice Springs, an up-and-coming area, and provided a unique opportunity for forward-thinking investors.

When looking at the plans for the properties around the area, it would have all been colored green – green for the land Righteous Brothers had bought, with a single small rectangle of red slap-bang in the middle of it. Mr. Witness's property. A pimple on the face of something with the potential to be beautiful. They were going to build there anyway, but they would prefer to do it without the need to build around Jeremiah, and so they had put in the paperwork to have Mr. Witness forcibly removed. But before they could do that they had to hand him the order in person. If he acquiesced, or was friendly with their demands, it could help the process move swiftly.

Mr. Pearson took a step toward the house. His foot sank into a recess in the soil.

"Damn moles," he said, kicking the dirt off his shiny black shoes. "They dig under the surface and the land gives way. They should all be shot."

They climbed the dusty steps to the porch. It creaked beneath their feet. They had to play a game of hopscotch over the holes to get to the door. There was a thick crack that rose from the steps to halfway up the wall.

"The place is falling apart," Mr. Pearson said. "We're doing him a favor taking it off his hands before it falls on his head."

He straightened his jacket, checked his hair, put on his best smile, and then knocked on the door.

# Chapter Two

VISITORS. Jeremiah's top lip curled into a sneer. Visitors were uninvited guests who assumed the rules of trespassing didn't apply to them. They were mistaken. Jeremiah hated the arrogance of people. Bringing their fat useless bodies to his property. Knocking on his front door. They always wanted something, even if on the face of it they wanted to give. People did things for themselves, to make themselves feel good or show they cared. Everyone was selling something.

There were those who openly tried to sell things. At least they were honest about it. Whether it was insurance; "Hey, he's an old fart. Let's try to squeeze as much money out of him as we can!" Or Bible bashers, come to shovel their shit in his ears. At the beginning they would come with cheery happy smiles, come to spread the word of their Lord and Savior. Well, Jeremiah didn't need saving. He didn't need their Lord. All the belief he needed was in his shotgun, which he kept by the door for such occasions. They soon prayed for their Lord and Savior then.

Then came the girl scouts with their so-called delicious 'home-made' cookies. Well, they didn't look delicious to him. How delicious could they be if they were made by young hands? Jeremiah was not a precious man. He cared only about the result, the finished product, and he had looked at their little blank boxes of tasteless products and found them wanting. Were the girl scouts raising awareness and funds for a very worthy cause? Probably. Did Jeremiah care? Not in the slightest. He believed in getting quantity, and then quality, from anything he bought. And always at a better-than-reasonable price.

And then came the worst of the worst. Property developers. More like property destroyers. They came with money and promises, shit-eating grins, and fancy cars designed to intimidate. But Jeremiah wasn't the type to be so easily intimidated. A car was something to get you from A to B, anything else was wasteful showing off and he had no use for it. They shoveled shit and called it gold.

Jeremiah peered through the peephole now, watching as the fat twit preened what little hair he had on his head.

Jeremiah reached for his gun, and then hesitated. The last thing he needed was for them, or, more importantly, the courts, to think he was a

raving gun-wielding lunatic whenever someone came to the door. He'd had a bad experience of that with the Bible bashers. But at least everyone secretly knew the Bible bashers had to be crazier than him to be doing that they were doing.

Jeremiah opened the door, getting an eyeful of the fat fool and his two cronies, Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum, at either shoulder.

"Good afternoon," Fatty said. "My name is Mr. Pearson, from Righteous Brothers. That's the property development company, not the singers."

He chuckled to himself as if this was the first time he'd ever uttered the incredibly feeble joke.

"I'm here to make sure you got our notifications about the opportunity to develop your property," Fatty said.

Jeremiah didn't let him get any further. He unleashed a tirade on the hapless fools, opening the floodgates, letting rip and shouting at them as loud as his old voice would allow. He wasn't even sure what he was saying, except that he made sure to slip plenty of offensive words in there. People were always surprised when an old person swore. Well, these fools wouldn't be after this afternoon.

After what Jeremiah deemed an appropriate length of time, he quietened down. The three men stood there, blinking, like they couldn't believe what they'd just seen.

Fatty straightened his clothes.

"Did you receive our letters?" he said calmly.

"Yes, I got your stinking letters," Jeremiah said. "And I took great pleasure in burning them."

There was a flicker behind one of the stooge's eyes. As quickly as it came, it was gone.

Fatty calmly took an envelope from his inside jacket pocket and offered it to him. Jeremiah backed away from the letter like it contained the plague, turned, and slammed the door in Fatty's face. It came so close to his nose he rocked slightly back on his heels.

"We're going to get your property, Mr. Witness," Fatty said on the other side of the door. "It's only a matter of time. You're better served accepting our proposal or risk losing out on the offer of a lifetime."

The envelope slid under the door. Jeremiah ignored it.

“We tried,” Fatty said. “Let’s get back to town. I’m going to need a tetanus shot.”

# Chapter Three

THE SIGHT OF the old man had made Graham start. At first he thought they must have gotten the wrong address, or Jeremiah had moved without informing them. This man could clearly not have been the Jeremiah he knew from childhood. And yet, there was a likeness there, a familiarity with the shape of the face and eyes. The features had fallen, become soft and haggard, his ears had doubled in size, and though he could never have been described as a handsome man, now Jeremiah looked like an extra from a Lord of the Rings film.

And when he opened his mouth, curved and round like a creature from a horror story, his eyes wide, bloodshot and yellowed, a spring of profanity escaped the likes of which Graham had never heard. He screamed and shouted at them in heavily nuanced words that even Graham, with a background in this area, couldn't understand. And once he was finished, Mr. Pearson had smiled as if Mr. Witness hadn't spoken at all, and dealt the deciding blow.

Graham would have shaken his head if he'd had the nerve. When Jeremiah admitted he'd indeed received their letters, the old man had unknowingly signed his death warrant. That was the greatest weapon in the property developer's arsenal: ignorance.

It wasn't even really their fault. People tended to concentrate on learning what affected them in their daily lives rather than things they found boring or tedious. The law was something people generally followed, not studied. If they had, they would have discovered a world not of black and white, but of the greys of a million different hues. By confirming he had received the letters, the old man had also confirmed he had taken no action. He was at the court's mercy, and it most likely would not be in his favor.

Mr. Pearson slowed the car at the junction that joined the motorway. The car stopped.

"Get out," Mr. Pearson said.

For a moment, Graham wasn't sure who he was talking to.

"Me?" Graham said.

"Of course you," Mr. Pearson said.

"What for?" Graham said.

“These are your people,” Mr. Pearson said. “It’s your job to convince him to hand his property over to us.”

“But he told us he received the letters,” Graham said. “We can hang him with that.”

“We’ll need to go through the courts,” Mr. Pearson said. “We need faster results.”

“How am I supposed to do that?” Graham said. “He won’t listen to me.”

“Then make him listen to you,” Mr. Pearson said. “And don’t bother coming back until you have those deeds.”

“Possessing the deeds doesn’t make us the property owners,” Graham said.

“No, but dear old Mr. Witness neglected to register his property with the authorities,” Mr. Pearson said. “Without the deeds he’ll have a harder time proving he’s the owner. The perfect time for us to take it from him.”

“You can’t do this,” Graham said.

“No?” Mr. Pearson said. “That’s funny. I think I just did.”

Mr. Pearson was serious. Graham looked to Dwayne, but he was looking away. Graham hesitated before getting out of the car.

“Dwayne, join me upfront,” Mr. Pearson said.

Dwayne got out and sat in the front passenger seat. His kept his eyes on the ground, pointedly not looking at Graham.

“You know I don’t like you,” Mr. Pearson said to Graham. “Why else did you think I brought you on this trip?”

He hit the gas and the wheels spun, kicking up dust, coating Graham. He coughed and watched as the car pulled away and disappeared over the horizon. He listened to the jabberings of the crickets and grasshoppers in the undergrowth before pulling his head back and letting out a scream. He kicked at a tuft of grass, swearing, performing a reenactment of Jeremiah’s tirade.

The motorway was silent, the way it often was in Australia. There were no cars and the chances of hitching a lift were significantly less than the possibility of getting bitten by a poisonous snake, even after his boss had cleared the way.

He turned to look back at the dusty road that led back to Jeremiah’s house. Jeremiah had a car. Maybe he could get a lift. He almost laughed. Maybe he could borrow Jeremiah’s car, just to town, and then call the cops

and let them know where the car was so the old man could get it back. That wasn't so bad, was it?

Graham walked up the road toward Jeremiah's house. He turned the puzzle of the deeds over in his mind. How would he get them? Could he get them without the old man knowing?

Graham paused. He shook his head. He never even questioned whether or not he would try to get them, only *how* to get them. Mr. Pearson was an asshole, a bigot, a sexist, and arrogant beyond belief, but he sure was a formidable judge of character.

# Chapter Four

THE KETTLE whistled, a high-pitched whine that would have made Jeremiah's ears hurt, except he was too busy looking out the kitchen window at his back garden to notice. The muscles in his arms were tight. He was still bubbling with rage. He shook his head. What gave them the right to try and take his home away? It was all he had. And suddenly he felt weak and tired to his bones.

Something wet pressed against his forehead. He reached up and touched it. His fingertips came away damp, and when he turned, he saw the kettle was still bubbling away. He switched the hob off and poured the hot water into his single chipped cup. There was just a dribble left. He refilled the kettle and boiled it again. His mind wandered. He became calm, but resolute. He would not let them take his house away from him. Ever.

He opened the fridge door. Seven plates sat on the shelves. Five had identical sandwiches on them. Two were empty. It must have been a Wednesday. He ate the same corned beef sandwiches every day. He'd gotten sick of them a long time since, but when he thought about what else he had to eat and the effort it would take to make something new, he gave up. An engine needed fuel. It didn't matter the quality. His taste buds had long since given out, so he couldn't taste the food anyway. That was his life. Tasteless. Without flavor.

The only real interior design he had were model airplanes hanging from the ceiling on metal wires, in the midst of a dogfight. The planes were German Messerschmitts and British Spitfires, a reenactment of the Battle of Britain, to Jeremiah's eye the most important battle of the twentieth century.

Jeremiah picked up a photograph frame and touched the glass. The final few dregs of pent-up aggression left him. A smile came to his lips. Those were good times. He caught sight of his reflection, of the deep ridges in his forehead. He angled the frame away so he couldn't see himself.

He looked through the dirty kitchen window again at the eucalyptus tree perched on the far corner of his property. It stretched for the sky, its foliage bent to one side by the harsh winds, looking like something that belonged in a Poe poem.

Jeremiah picked up his tea and sandwiches and exited through the backdoor.

# Chapter Five

WHEN GRAHAM got within view of the decrepit old house he turned and headed at a right-angle away from it. Nighttime was already descending, the heat dissipating, the red of the Outback fading into a deep sapphire blue. He tucked his hands in his pockets and raised the collar of his coat.

The old fart came out of his house and headed toward the far corner of his land, toward a tall eucalyptus tree. He sat underneath it on a branch that jutted out at a right angle, like an arm trying to pull itself out of the ground, and looked toward the empty flatlands of the Outback, stretching into the distance in all directions.

He could see Jeremiah's lips were moving, his head nodding. *Crazy old loon.* He would be better off in an old people's home if he had any sense.

Graham turned to the house. It couldn't be counted as breaking and entering if he entered without breaking anything, right? He'd visited the house enough in his youth to remember the layout. It wasn't a large house and it couldn't have changed that much over the years. There had clearly been no extensions or renovations.

Graham approached the front door, not visible from Jeremiah's vantage point. Was it just his imagination or had the crack up the side of the wall gotten larger? It was thick and almost reached to the roof now. Graham shrugged. What were the chances it would collapse right this moment after all these years? He turned the door knob, but it didn't open.

A fuzzy scrap of wood stuck out of the wall like an unkempt hairdo. He pulled at the splinters and found a small hole. It wasn't big, but then Graham didn't have the biggest hands. He pressed his fingers together and pushed them through the opening. His hand got stuck. He pressed harder and there was a soft crack, like the crunch of damp wood. Around his wrist was a bracelet of rotten wood. He angled his arm down, reaching for the door knob. He went up onto his toes and touched it with his fingertips. He stretched a little further and felt the key. He turned it, and the lock clicked open.

He pushed the door open. It squeaked on old hinges. He stepped inside and closed the door, leaving it unlocked in case he needed to make a quick getaway. He took his rotten wood bracelet off and pressed it back into the wall. *So much for not-breaking and entering.*

He turned and looked at the house’s interior. His eyes widened. He hadn’t thought this through.

# Chapter Six

THE HOUSE'S interior was as damaged and changed as Jeremiah's exterior. Graham wouldn't have recognized the place if it wasn't for the fact he'd just walked through the front door.

Newspaper towers were lined up against two walls. Some leaned over and would have fallen if another tower hadn't propped it up. Paths wound through the detritus like wild animal trails in a forest.

Model airplanes hung from the ceiling. Some had a thick layer of dust on them, others spotless, having been recently installed. The paintwork was exceptional, performed by a steady hand, the pieces interlocking clearly and distinctly. Even the pilots had faces, screwed up in concentration, hands gripping their airplane controls tight.

Only a few workspaces were not covered, and these, Graham suspected, were the areas Jeremiah most often spent his time. The wingback armchair had a vague outline of where the old man would sit for the night, a small bar heater at its feet. A small patio table was used as a dining table. It was damaged, chipped and worn. One of the legs had snapped off and hastily fixed by shoving books underneath it, propping it up. One knife, one fork, one small and medium-sized plate. The hallmarks of a bachelor. Despite the mess there was no dirt on the furniture. It was well-maintained, if not tidy.

Out the kitchen window, the eucalyptus tree was cast in silhouette by the setting sun. Jeremiah was still sat on the tree root, head bowed down and forlorn.

Graham cast an eye over the space. There was a cupboard, a wardrobe and a cabinet. He ruled out the wardrobe and cupboard and headed for the glass-fronted cabinet in the corner. If he lived here, it was the place he would most likely put any important documents.

He pulled the front door open. A shelf of paper and cards, memoirs of a former life, spilled from the inside. There was the fusty smell of dead skin and old paper. A library for the old. Jeremiah was living in a scrapbook.

Graham picked up the fallen pieces of paper and glanced at each one. Some were grocery lists, yellowed with age, others random phone numbers, old bills and receipts. Graham piled them up to one side while he sorted through the rest.

He sensed someone looking at him. Through the glass side panels of the cabinet were photo frames of a smiling happy family, windows into a world, a bubble, that no longer existed, fading like a burning tree, brightly for a fragile moment before turning to ash. That was the space Jeremiah existed in now, a bubble, an echo of the moments of the past, and though he existed inside it, it would end with him. No one would remember him, until one day the wrecking ball came to demolish the house and remove the body of the impediment to the development project they were working on. That would be how Jeremiah Witness would be remembered. A blockage to development, a remnant of a world that no longer existed.

Graham caught movement out the corner of his eye. Jeremiah was heading back to the house.

Graham didn't panic. Jeremiah was moving slowly enough for Graham to consider his options. Leave now, grab the car keys that hung from a hook on the cabinet, or stay and hide, waiting for the right time to continue his search.

Though Graham hated to admit it, he needed his job, and as much as he hated his boss, times were tough in finding a well-paying position.

He was spoilt for choice regarding hiding places. The question was, where? He crouched in a corner behind two piles of old newspapers, within easy access of the front door, and peered out from between them.

The backdoor slammed shut. Jeremiah grumbled to himself under his breath as he came into the front room. Graham could make out some words, but most were indistinguishable. Was he insane? How could he not be, locked up in here by himself for the past God knew how many years.

Jeremiah fell into his armchair, shuffled his shoulders, getting deep into the fabric. He turned the radio on and listened to a show. Graham didn't think he'd heard old music like that since he was a boy and watched black and white movies. Within moments heavy snoring rattled from the old man's nose and throat like a cartoon sound effect.

*Great,* Graham thought. *Now what am I supposed to do?*

He sat up and peered over the newspapers at the armchair. Jeremiah lay with his head tilted back, restrained in one of the loping crannies on the top. He snorted as he slept, body lying like it had been filleted.

Graham swallowed. If he was going to leave, now was his chance. He glanced at the door. He could sneak across the room, open the door, and get away… But what about the papers? How was he going to get them?

He'd have to return another time… Except he was never going to get a better opportunity than right now. He couldn't search with the old man laying the way he was. He might be a heavy sleeper but he couldn't risk him waking. His only hope was to get the old man to go to his bedroom. He could sleep deep and sound, leaving Graham to search the decrepit house to his heart's content – not that it made his heart content.

He reached for one of the old newspapers. He laid it down and unfolded it. Then he scrunched it up. He stopped, flinching at the loud sound. He waited a second. The old man hadn't moved a muscle and was still fast asleep.

Graham drew his arm back and threw the ball. It fell short and didn't make it to the old man. He balled up another page and took aim. This time, it sailed through the air and struck the armrest of the old man's chair. He rolled up another newspaper ball and let it fly. This one struck the old man on the forehead.

Jeremiah bolted forward, sitting up. He seemed to stare at the newspaper ball in his lap, and for a second Graham thought he was scuppered. It wouldn't take long for the old man to find him crouched as he was. He coiled his legs to spring up at the front door. He waited as the old man blinked his yellow eyes and got to his feet with great difficulty.

Jeremiah stumbled forward on his large bulbous feet, the paper ball falling from his lap. He stepped on it as he headed out of the room and in the direction of his bedroom. With his gaunt expression and the juddering way he moved he was the closest thing to the living dead Graham had ever seen. He waited, watching as the old man slid along the corridor. There was the heavy squeak of springs as he fell into his bed.

Graham waited a moment. He rose above the newspaper Tower of Pisa and crept across the room, stepping in front of the corridor. The old man's feet stuck out the end of his bed. Graham relaxed, just a little.

He turned to the front room. He could run away, leaving, and never come back, and he would never need to remember this moment in his life ever again, and that was certainly what he should do… Instead, he found himself stepping toward the cupboard.

He pulled the first drawer open. A few small paint pots and screws rolled into a corner. Graham picked up a sheaf of papers and read through each one. Nothing. There was a photo album. He hesitated before he picked it up. Graham enjoyed photos, looking at the pictures and making

up his own stories about the people and places. It would be a time sink unless he focused and pushed himself to just skim through the images, but the moment he opened the album he was enrapt.

The first picture had an image of him in it. It showed him with Jeremiah's son Stuart. They had smiley faces. Graham sat in a wheelbarrow, Stuart holding the handles.

He turned the thick pages, going back in time. The photos were not arranged in any particular order. Now they were of a wedding. Judging by the hairstyles, circa 1965. Happy faces and broad grins. Graham wondered where those people were now. *In the ground*, *probably*, he thought.

Graham paused. What if he did find the deeds? What would possessing them mean? They would mean the project would be greenlighted and they could evict the old man. Even if he claimed ownership of the land there was still a lengthy legal process. They would begin work on the land in the meanwhile. If Jeremiah's home were to be knocked down by accident, well, that would just be bad luck.

Did it change anything that he knew Jeremiah? That he had spent part of his youth here, under his roof? Eaten his food and played with his son? Working in the property business meant you were supposed to leave your morals at the door, or else you'd find your resume posted to it. You couldn't afford to make those kinds of decisions when you were in business.

But the world Graham and Jeremiah's past belonged to was gone, every bit as much as the photos that catalogued them on the walls and in the albums. All those eyes looking down at him, judging him. He felt embarrassed to be in this position. How did he ever end up here? How did he go from a child who came here to play during the evenings and weekends to someone who stole from those who had shown him nothing but kindness?

Was this what he needed to force him into a new line of work? To do something he really wanted to do rather than something that just paid the bills? His shoulders shrank.

"What are you doing?"

Jeremiah stood in the doorway. He'd woken up and stumbled down the corridor without Graham hearing him.

"I… I was just…" Graham said.

"What are you doing in my house?" Jeremiah shouted.

“I was just…” Graham said

Jeremiah leapt forward and gripped Graham by the collar, holding him in a tight fist. Despite the old man’s age, Graham feared for his life, feared suffering the same fate Jeremiah’s wife had. Murdered, with a swift anonymous burial.

“Get out!” Jeremiah said. “Get out! Get out! Get out!”

He screamed and bellowed, and his weedy arms seemed very strong. He threw Graham forward, toward the door. Graham tripped on a newspaper tower and hit the floor face first.

The floor shook. Graham felt it beneath his hands. And it continued to shake, long after it should have stopped.

Jeremiah’s eyes were wide with rage. Then they mellowed into confusion. A hanging photo frame shivered and shook, rattling on the wall. He reached out a hand to stay it, but it leapt off and smashed on the floor. Now all the frames were jittering, the model planes bandying to and fro like they had been possessed.

There was a loud crack and the floor gave way beneath them, falling away like crumble. Jeremiah skidded and banged into the wall. The hole spread wider and wider, and the newspapers and cupboards fell into it, consumed. The house shell itself remained intact, only the floor a gaping hole.

Finally, the building stopped shaking. Graham and Jeremiah stood, panting and out of breath, staring at the deep hole before them, each standing on a lonely platform of safety. Their eyes rose and they looked at one another, sharing a moment of relief.

*Creeeeaak!*

Jeremiah’s eyes widened. He looked at his feet. His platform snapped and he fell into the hole like he was standing on a stage trapdoor. His voice grew distant as he shouted: “Good Gooooooooood!”

All the way to silence.

Graham didn’t move a muscle. He just stared at the empty space Jeremiah had disappeared down. He peered at the door behind him, easily within reach. If he could just stretch…

*Creeeeaak!*

“Oh no,” Graham said.

His platform snapped. He fell into open space, his guts wrenching, his mind spinning, into the empty darkness beyond.

# Chapter Seven

GRAHAM FELL down, down, down, pummeled on every side by clods of dirt, small rocks, and mud. The earth erupted around him, knocking him side to side. Unsure of which direction he was falling in, he stuck his legs out to either side, dragging a torrent of soil down in his wake.

Tree roots snapped beneath his weight. Stones, large and small, fell on his head, making loud jarring crunching sounds. The tunnel was narrow, and despite his best efforts he couldn't slow himself down. Earth filled his mouth as he descended deeper and deeper into the bowels of the earth, and that's what it smelt like – bowels, like the sewers had opened out into the narrow tunnel.

Below him he saw a small hole that glowed orange with light. It grew larger and larger. Graham dug his heels into the tunnel to slow his descent, but the hole was still approaching. He gritted his teeth, and sensed passing through the hole was not going to be a pleasant experience.

He grunted through his teeth and forced his feet out further. He felt himself begin to slow. He stopped, not more than a few inches from the circle. Graham panted, his body exhausted. He angled himself to look down through the hole, but his body was in the way. He could only make out small yellow-orange lights. He looked up and couldn't make out anything more than a couple of feet away. The darkness stole his vision.

He shook his head. What was he going to do to get out of this?

"Stop whining," he said to himself. "You know what you have to do."

He dug his hands into the dirt wall on either side and lifted one foot. He did the same on the other side and scaled a few inches. He raised his hands again, digging in his fingers and lifting each foot.

Sweat dripped down his face. He tasted the dirt in it. But it was the only water available, so he sipped. The muscles tensed all over his body. He paused, taking a break. The fall had taken it out of him. He didn't know how much farther he had to climb, but he swore he would make it. Every inch of the way.

There was a deep rumbling. His feet juddered down a couple of inches, wiping away all his hard work. His legs pulled to the sides, growing wider, into the splits.

"Please no," he said.

The earth gave way and he fell, through the hole, toward the opening and yellow dots below.

# Chapter Eight

He'd seen a similar sight before, when coming down to land in an airport. Of course, then he'd had the benefit of riding in an airplane. He was tumbling through the air now, out of control.

But there might be a body of water below. If he wanted a chance of surviving the fall he would need to hit it with his feet first. He threw his arms and legs out, catching resistance. His spinning slowed and he straightened, pulling his body up with his hands by his sides and his feet pointing down.

The moment he did, his soles struck something. It wasn't water, but something hard. It broke under his weight. He was falling again, this time at a slower speed. He struck another surface, and another, each time slowing, but never stopping until…

*Thud.*

He stopped.

Dust tickled his nose. His eyes were clenched tight, breath rasping through his teeth, shoulders bunched up. He daren't move for fear he was going to start falling again. He muttered a prayer under his breath for it all to be over. And still, his eyes were clenched shut.

Only a minute after having stopped did he begin to think he was safe. He swore at himself for jinxing himself, and clenched his eyes even tighter, as if safety depended on him not seeing where he was. Then, ever so slowly, he began to open his eyes.

He peered around. He stretched his eyes open wide, uncertain if he had opened them or not. It was pitch dark. He concentrated on his breathing, focusing on each breath in, each breath out. He calmed down.

Above him were two holes. They mirrored the holes in the roof above them, and those above that, and above that, echoing into eternity.

He reached out with his hand. His fingers touched something hard. He flinched away from it. He touched it again, this time pressing his palm against it. It was metal. Then he reached back, behind himself, and felt another flat wall. He reached left, and felt the same sheet of material. *I'm in a stinking box*, he thought. *What is this? Some sort of elaborate trap?* Then he reached out with his right hand, expecting to feel another wall.

Someone grunted, shouted, and flew back, striking what Graham assumed was the fourth wall. The sudden sound, unexpected, drove Graham back too. He yelled and pressed himself against it, and then into the corner, as far from whatever was in there with him as possible.

Graham was not alone.

# Chapter Nine

SOMETHING TOUCHED Graham's foot. He flinched back, shouting. The other guy shouted. They both shouted. And finally, when neither of them had any oxygen left, they both stopped.

"Jeremiah?" Graham said.

"Yeah," Jeremiah said. "Who're you?"

"I'm Graham."

"Who?" Jeremiah said.

"The one who was in your house before the floor fell through," Graham said.

"You fell too?" the old man said.

"Evidently," Graham said.

"What are we doing here?" Jeremiah said.

"It was an accident," Graham said. "We aren't meant to be here. Someone will come looking for us. Someone must come by your place sometimes, right? A cleaner or a helper or a nurse or something? They'll see the hole, think it suspicious, and call the fire brigade or the police or whoever handles these things."

"A stripper comes by once every so often," Jeremiah said.

"Really?" Graham said.

"Of course not you fool!" Jeremiah said. "No one comes. And when they do, I'm quick to get them to leave."

"I'm the fool?" Graham said. "You're the one whose floor just fell out from under him. Why don't you take proper care of your property?"

"Everything was fine before you came snooping around," Jeremiah said. "It was probably you that caused it."

"Yeah, right," Graham said. "Because I've got nothing better to do with my time than to get myself stuck down here with an old fart."

"That's the problem with your generation," Jeremiah said. "Always quick to blame your misfortune on someone else."

"I don't think now is the right time to be discussing generation gaps," Graham said. "Hang on. I think I feel something. I think it's a door knob."

"A what?" Jeremiah said.

"A door knob," Graham said. "Clean your ears out. It's strange. It's really low, like it's a child's door or something."

“Turn it then,” Jeremiah said.
“We don’t know what’s on the other side,” Graham said.
“We know what’s on this side,” Jeremiah said. “Open it.”

# Chapter Ten

THE DOOR creaked open. The room it opened onto was large and appeared empty. Graham ducked his head down to fit through, shuffling forward.

"Watch your head," Graham said. "The doorway's a bit low."

"I can see it," Jeremiah said.

He got through and then cast around.

"Looks like a church," he said.

"Built for children," Graham said.

All the pews were low. Even the pulpit was half its usual height. They walked down the aisle and came to the door at the end. They looked back at the room they had emerged from. It was a non-descript cupboard. On the floor were a bunch of religious artefacts, including a cross encrusted with jewels. It'd snapped under their feet.

"What do you want to do?" Graham said.

"Get the hell out of this place, for a start," Jeremiah said. "I haven't been in church for years and I'm not about to start now."

They moved to the front of the church and pushed the front door open. They peered out at a quiet dark dirt road, hard-packed by use. Buildings ran along either side of it, like a regular street, if a little worn around the edges. The streetlamps glowed with soft golden light, candles burned down to nubs. The town was silent as the grave. Jeremiah instantly regretted using the word 'grave'.

"Am I dreaming?" Jeremiah said.

"If you are, I am too," Graham said. "And my dreams don't usually feature old geezers."

Neither of them stepped outside. Instead, they just peered out at this new world. Jeremiah wasn't scared to admit he was afraid. By the expression on Graham's face he could tell he felt the same.

Graham cleared his throat.

"What?" Jeremiah said.

"You said you wanted to leave here," Graham said. "You should step through first."

"And you don't?" Jeremiah said. "What happened to the impetuousness of youth? Taking risks is meant to be your forte."

“I gave up taking risks in high school,” Graham said. “You’re old. You’ve got less to lose.”

“Don’t get all heroic on me,” Jeremiah said. “Where are you going to run even if there was someone out there?”

“Are you going or not?” Graham said.

Jeremiah sighed. He ducked his head down and stepped outside. Nothing happened to him. Graham stepped out behind him. The globes of light held up on tall poles lit little, but enough to illuminate the road. As they walked through the puddles of light Jeremiah felt like he was in a fairy tale. Not a child’s one, but one of those with a modern twist, with all the childish bits cut out and scary scenes enhanced with gore, the type aimed at adults with an eighteen certificate, and banned in a handful of countries to boot.

A snort.

To their left. They spun to face it. But it was just a closed door on a non-descript shack. The snort came again, and this time Jeremiah recognized it for what it was: a snore.

“It’s okay,” Jeremiah said. “Whoever it is is fast asleep.”

“Fast asleep?” Graham said. “People live down here?”

“You didn’t think the houses formed themselves, did you?” Jeremiah said.

The road wound like a snake through the town. The houses were nothing more than shacks, cobbled together with pieces of whatever they found lying around.

“We don’t even know where we’re going,” Graham said, keeping his voice down.

“We’re heading away from this place,” Jeremiah said. “Preferably back toward the surface.”

“But where are we?” Graham said.

“My guess?” Jeremiah said. “Underground.”

“Considering we fell through a sinkhole I think we can take that as read,” Graham said. “But *where* are we?”

“In the asshole of nowhere’s my bet,” Jeremiah said.

“You know, you swear a lot for an old guy,” Graham said.

“For an old guy I’ve got a lot to swear about,” Jeremiah said.

“Stop,” Graham said. “I think I heard something.”

“I didn’t hear anything,” Jeremiah said.

“With ears like yours you should be able to pick up a fly’s wings beating, but you can’t,” Graham said. “You’re half deaf.”

“Halt! Who goes there?” a voice from the shadows said.

The voice was deep and resonant, like an angry principal.

Graham and Jeremiah froze, standing stock still. “See?” Graham’s expression seemed to say.

“All villagers should be in their homes,” the voice said. “Return to your homes immediately.”

“Believe me,” Graham said. “I’d like nothing more.”

There was a sigh, and then heavy footsteps as the owner of the voice trudged toward them.

“What should we do?” Graham whispered to Jeremiah.

“We get him to help us,” Jeremiah said. “I know if I lived down here, I wouldn’t want you with me.”

The footsteps crunched on the dirt, growing louder and louder.

The figure emerged from the darkness. First the steel toe-capped boots came into the light, and then the blood-red uniform with a gold medallion stitched on the front. Finally came the tall helmet, and a spear clutched in the man’s hand.

The guard dropped his spear, staring at Jeremiah and Graham, eyes going from one man to the other, as if he couldn’t quite take in what he was seeing.

Graham felt like saying the same thing to the guard. Staring at the figure, they were just as enrapt. The man before them was a perfectly scaled-down human. Without his boots and hat he wouldn’t have reached up to their ribcages.

“Surfacers!” the figure said, finally finding his voice. Then louder: “Surfacers! Surfacers!”

“No,” Graham said, waving his hands to stop the little man. “Don’t. It’s okay. We mean you no harm.”

Lights came on in the windows of the houses around them. Fellow little men and women poked their heads out of their homes, staring down at what, to them, appeared to be giants.

“Well,” Graham said to Jeremiah. “It’s been nice knowing you.”

He took off at a sprint, knocking the uniformed guard aside.

“Wait!” Jeremiah said. “You can’t leave me here!”

“When I get to the surface I’ll send help,” Graham said.

“You coward!” Jeremiah said.

“And proud of it,” Graham said.

Jeremiah turned to face the deluge of little men and women that surrounded him.

“Uh, hi,” he said.

# Chapter Eleven

IT DIDN'T SORE Graham at all to see the little figures surrounding Jeremiah. The old geezer might even be able to fight them off, running through their town like King Kong.

Graham had never been much of a stay-and-fight type. He was much more into the self-preservation flight response. He ran into the darkness at a speed none of the little men could hope to match. But he was at a disadvantage: he didn't know where he was going, or indeed if there was even somewhere he should have been going to.

The road split off in two directions. With no idea where he was heading, he turned left and hoped for the best.

Movement in the darkness.

Graham skidded to a halt. Uniformed guards ran at him, slings clutched in their hands. He turned back the way he had come, taking the right-hand road. He heard something whizz overhead, but didn't look back. Another of the weapons sailed over his head: a pair of stones attached to a thin cord. He'd seen them before on history documentaries. They were designed to snap around a prey's limbs and trip them up. Graham picked up his knees and made his strides as long as possible to offset their effectiveness.

He was drawing close to a tunnel. A series of tunnels, one next to the other. Good. They felt like the right way to go. He ran at the closest one. Then he felt a tug on his shirt.

He looked down to see a small pair of eyes and tiny hands. It was one of the little men! The little man slid down Graham's body to his ankles, and held on tight. Two more of the creatures leapt off the craggy wall and latched onto him.

They wrapped themselves around his legs and arms like children desperate to go on a theme park ride. He pried off their fingers on one hand, and they would clamp down harder with the other. When he reached for the second hand they gripped with the released hand again.

"Get off me!" Graham said.

He looked back. A horde of them were running after him. Graham turned and ran, slightly slowed by the miniature men. It was only when

they released their legs and dragged them along the ground, hooking around anything they could find that Graham really slowed.

Graham raised his fists to beat at them, but they were so small and delicate-looking that he felt like he would be striking children. He couldn’t do it.

The guards were catching up, shouting in their small voices like kids on a playground.

Graham, with more than a little hesitancy, pushed aggressively at the figures on his legs, prying at them and finally, with no other choice, punched at them. They were tougher than they looked, and, not an experienced fighter, Graham wasn’t used to dealing damage. He pried one of the little men off and tossed him aside. The others clung on like limpets, giving no inch.

“Come on, guys!” Graham said. “What have I ever done to you? Let me go!”

The horde caught up with him. They jumped, piling on top of him, wrapping around him with their strong bodies. Graham disappeared beneath them like a rugby scrum.

# Chapter Twelve

THE GUARDS led Jeremiah toward a castle hewn from a rock that rose up from the middle of the huge cavernous space. They wound down identical corridors until they came to a large room decorated sparsely with well-appointed furniture. The guards closed the door behind Jeremiah. He heard the lock click.

The carpet was thin, a vivid red, like spilled blood. The cabinets had been refurbished to a high standard. Jeremiah noticed because it was something his wife had spent her life doing. She was a carpenter by trade, rare for a woman, especially one as dainty as she was. She had the skill to create really beautiful, ornate pieces, and was commissioned far and wide by people all over the world.

The guards hadn't answered his questions, but they were gentle. Jeremiah tried each of the three doors in the room. They were all locked.

He heard a commotion down the corridor. The set of doors he'd been brought through banged open and a body was tossed inside. A guard gently placed Graham's jacket on top of the heap, and then vacated.

Graham didn't move for a while, preferring to just lay on the floor.

"Are you all right?" Jeremiah said.

"Just… leave me alone for a bit," Graham said.

He stared into space. Then finally, he sat up. He rubbed at his ankles and wrists. His clothing was wrinkled and scuffed with dirt, but he was in otherwise good shape.

"How far did you get?" Jeremiah said.

"Far enough to know there are thousands of these little monsters," Graham said. "I can't believe this. I've died and gone to Munchkin heaven."

He got up and moved to the first two doors. They were locked.

"I already checked," Jeremiah said.

Graham checked the last door anyway.

"Locked," he said.

He pressed his eye to a door crack and peered out. Next he tried the windows, grumbling to himself. Then he looked out of the huge arched windows. They peered down on the town from a great distance. No way they were getting out that way. There was nowhere to run.

Jeremiah took a seat at one of the large tall-backed dining chairs.

“We’ll just have to see what they want with us,” he said.

“How can you be calm at a moment like this?” Graham said.

“Because there’s no use in getting ourselves all worked up for nothing,” Jeremiah said. “Will you sit down? You’re making me dizzy.”

But Graham didn’t sit down. He pressed his hands against each of the ornate panels around the room.

“You’re never going to pull those panels off,” Jeremiah said. “They’re fixed to the wall. It’d be easier to tear the castle down.”

“Don’t tempt me,” Graham said.

“Perhaps I should run as fast as I can and leave a defenseless old man to the whims of God-knows-who,” Jeremiah said. “That sounds like a better plan.”

“Now you’re thinking,” Graham said. “I would have come back for you.”

“Sure you would,” Jeremiah said. “The moment after you changed your name and moved to Brazil.”

“Why Brazil?” Graham said. “I prefer Paraguay.”

He pressed his lips together.

“Would you have done any differently if the tables were turned?” he said.

Probably not. But Jeremiah wasn’t about to admit that. Holding guilt over someone could have its uses. It would make Graham think twice about doing it again. But looking at Graham’s nervous disposition, perhaps that was just wishful thinking. He would be off the moment he had the chance.

“What do you think they want with us?” Graham said.

“Steak, I shouldn’t wonder,” Jeremiah said.

“Steak?” Graham said.

“They’ll go for me first, I suspect,” Jeremiah said. “Use me as some kind of entrée. They’ll certainly fatten you up first. Good, lean meat like you. They wouldn’t waste that.”

“Thanks for the reassurance,” Graham said.

“What were you looking for in my drawers, anyway?” Jeremiah said. “My prized matchstick collection?”

“Nothing,” Graham said. “I wasn’t looking for anything.”

“A man doesn’t break into an old man’s house to admire the furniture,” Jeremiah said.

“I didn’t break in,” Graham said.

“The hole in the wall would beg to differ,” Jeremiah said. “You big city people are all the same. You come to the country and you think because you’ve got money you can push the rest of us around.”

“I don’t think I can push you around,” Graham said.

“It certainly felt like pushing,” Jeremiah said. “Your boss is a real piece of work.”

“I’m not my boss,” Graham said.

“Same suit, same hairstyle,” Jeremiah said. “If the suit fits.”

Graham ground his teeth.

“What does it matter now, anyway?” he said. “We’re trapped miles beneath the surface, in some kind of midget hell. It doesn’t matter what I’m wearing or where I work. We have to figure out a way to get out of here.”

“You ran the length of the town,” Jeremiah said. “What did you see?”

“Tunnels,” Graham said. “Lots and lots of tunnels.”

“One of them must lead back up to the surface, don’t you think?” Jeremiah said.

“Maybe,” Graham said. “But if one does, why are all these people still here?”

The tall doors opened and a small figure entered. He was dressed in a long red flowing cloak that trailed ten feet behind him. He wore a large gold amulet and walked with the grandeur of a Caesar before the Senate, head held high, chest out, taking long loping strides. He wore shoes with high heels and hair brushed up to look taller.

He looked Graham and Jeremiah over, barely moving his head, only his eyes working up and down. Then his harsh expression melted and he smiled broadly at them.

“Hello there!” he said. “I am Leader. Welcome to Api Penyucian.”

# Chapter Thirteen

GRAHAM AND JEREMIAH just stared at the little figure. Graham was the first to find his tongue.

"You speak English?" he said.

"We all can," Leader said.

"But none of the others spoke to me when I asked them questions," Jeremiah said.

"Or when I swore at them," Graham said.

"They're under orders never to speak unless during the course of duty," Leader said. "Makes for dull conversation, but very efficient guards."

Graham and Jeremiah exchanged a glance.

"I apologize if our guards were not careful with you," Leader said. "They are not used to handling Surfacers."

"Surfacers?" Jeremiah said. "What's a Surfacer?"

"Our word for people like you – from up top," Leader said, "and not down here like us."

"What are you called?" Graham said with a snort. "Undergrounders?"

"Actually, yes," Leader said.

"Oh," Graham said.

"Do you get many Surfacers down here?" Jeremiah said.

"No," Leader said. "It's been quite a while since we had a fresh Surfacer down here."

Fresh. Maybe they were going to eat them after all. Graham gulped.

"Are you hungry?" Leader said. "You look a little thin."

Graham vehemently shook his head.

"Where exactly are we?" Jeremiah said.

Leader smiled.

"If we knew that, we would have been out of here decades ago," Leader said. "We know we're underground – far underground – but we don't precisely know where."

"Deep underground?" Graham said. "But… we didn't fall far. Did we?"

"I wish you hadn't," Leader said. "But you may have fallen farther than you realize."

Jeremiah cocked his head to one side. Something about Leader's statement had piqued his interest, but he said nothing.

“How did you and your people come to be here?” Graham said.

“Rather like you,” Leader said. “Our tribe fell through a sinkhole hundreds of years ago. A huge one. Our ancestors were tribesmen, out on a small island off the coast of Indonesia. Our whole island was swallowed. We’ve been down here ever since.”

“Centuries?” Jeremiah said. “Why haven’t you found a way out yet?”

“We’ve been digging,” Leader said. “Digging in every direction we can, trying to pick up hints of where we are and where we should be heading. It’s tough when you don’t know your starting place.”

“What do you do for food?” Jeremiah said.

Graham glared at him. Of all the questions to ask.

“Roots, mainly,” Leader said. “Bugs, crushed roots, and Mush, something we discovered while digging. Anything we can get our hands on, really. Another reason to dig in every direction. For food. We have hit water and oil many times and lost many of our people, but we keep digging.”

“How is it you can speak English?” Graham said. “Why not Indonesian or some other language?”

“Both you and our ancestors met in the past,” Leader said. “They traded. Our ancestors learned your culture and language.”

“That’s all very interesting,” Graham said with folded arms. “But how do we get out of here?”

“There is no getting out of here,” Leader said. “At least, not yet. Come for a walk with me. I’ll explain.”

# Chapter Fourteen

“We are descended from a tribe of people from the surface,” Leader said. “Their name has long since been forgotten, but we remain. Down here we each have a job, a task. It gives us meaning and direction. Cooks are called Cooks. Diggers, Diggers. The Leader, Leader. We are a functioning machine with many intricate parts.”

Small globes of light made a latticework of tiny glowing orbs around the great dome. They lit the whole town below. Little people in earth-colored clothes moved with purpose, some into the town, most out of it, toward the narrow tunnels that ran from the town at regular intervals, like a giant clock face with hundreds of hours.

“Most of the folk here are miners,” Leader said. “They dig all day, gradually reaching out, farther and farther away. Sometimes we strike water or a metal deposit. Then we tunnel in another direction.”

“Mining dwarfs,” Graham said, his voice flat.

Jeremiah kept his eyes off Graham for fear he would burst out laughing.

“They’re not dwarfs,” Jeremiah managed to say. “They’re just a little vertically challenged.”

“Little’s the right word,” Graham mumbled.

“Only the tallest and strongest become guards,” Leader said.

Jeremiah and Graham shared a look. Even the tallest guard didn’t reach their chests.

“Hi ho,” one of the little men said, raising his hand in friendly salute to a fellow miner.

“I’m saying nothing,” Graham said.

The guards followed behind them, watching the locals closely. The town folk shied away and kept a safe distance. Jeremiah took note of it, but said nothing. If a people were afraid of those responsible for order, what would that mean for them as strangers?

“How is it you became leader here?” Jeremiah said.

“We pass down responsibilities from parent to child,” Leader said. “My father was leader, as was his father, and so on, through the ages. Is this a fair system? No. But it prevents bickering and in-fighting. We are united in a single goal: to get to the surface. Once we are out, we can immerse

ourselves in the cultures of those on the surface. But right now, down here, we need to focus."

The little people were busy about their work, carrying pickaxes, shovels and other digging equipment. They entered the tunnels, turning the dome into a ghost town.

"Your ancestors gave my ancestor this amulet," Leader said, gesturing to his gold necklace. "It's written in a language we don't understand."

Graham looked at it, but it was all Greek to him.

"Looks like it's Latin," Jeremiah said.

"Can you read it?" Leader said.

"I haven't studied since I was a boy," Jeremiah said. "Let me take a closer look."

He held the amulet in his palm and turned his head to the side as he read it. He paused, blinking, before turning the amulet over. Jeremiah frowned for a moment, mumbling under his breath.

"What does it say?" Leader said.

"I'm not sure," Jeremiah said. "It's been a while since I studied Latin. But I think it says something like 'Blessings to he who carries me'. It's a good luck charm."

Leader smiled.

"For generations we pondered its meaning," he said. "Now you have given us the answer. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Jeremiah said.

Leader caught Graham peering at the tunnels around the town.

"You are not prisoners here," Leader said. "You are free to come and go as you please. But bear in mind that right now there is no way out. If there was, none of us would be here. But you are free to walk around as much as you want. You'll have to get used to the stares."

The young children – so small they looked like dolls – waved and stared at them, eyes wide.

"They've never seen surface people before," Leader said.

Jeremiah cracked a rare smile and waved at the kids. Their eyes grew wider still.

"I don't understand how you could have been down here so long and not found a way out," Graham said.

"The route to the surface is not an easy one," Leader said. "It is not straight, and must go around many obstacles. Sometimes there are more

obstacles than earth. And we dig by hand."

"Hand?" Graham said. "Why don't you build a machine to dig?"

"We have tried," Leader said. "But every attempt ends in failure."

"Why?" Jeremiah said. "You have a large population down here. I would have thought you could have trained some bright people to engineer a digger for you."

"The digger is not the problem," Leader said. "It is the power source. No matter how hard we try we cannot make one that works."

"And yet you thrive down here," Jeremiah said.

"We are human," Leader said. "We do what we must to survive. Come, I will show you what we know of your world."

# Chapter Fifteen

LEADER LED them to a large building. The wall was sheer, rising up and up, bending back upon itself until it made a round dome-like shape overhead.

Arranged on plinths were a series of objects they recognized immediately: garbage from the surface, arranged as if it were beautiful art. Tin cans stood in a pyramid. Pet accessories suspended from wires, giving the illusion of invisible animals. There were genuine artefacts from the ancient world too, but they were mixed with the new, placed on an equal footing with the junk.

"These are all the artefacts we have from the surface," Leader said.

"You kept it all?" Graham said.

"Every scrap we've found," Leader said.

"Why?" Jeremiah said.

"The reasons are two-fold," Leader said. "First, we like to remind ourselves of what our goal is. Faced with dirt walls all day can get to you. But if there's hope, a sign of something more out there that you're trying to achieve, then it's worth keeping those items on show for everyone to see at any time."

"What's the second reason?" Jeremiah said.

"So we can backward engineer what we've found," Leader said. "Often, the technology is beyond us and there's nothing we can learn. But at other times we can learn a great deal."

On a flat plinth behind a piece of sheet glass was a map of the Earth, with all its continents and countries clearly labelled. It was a little old and dated.

"One of our greatest finds," Leader said. "Tell me, is it accurate?"

"It is," Jeremiah said. "Though some of the countries no longer exist."

"Perhaps you can update it for us," Leader said.

Something caught Jeremiah's eye.

"This must be one of the diggers you were telling us about," Jeremiah said. "It's a lot bigger than I imagined."

It was about the size of an SUV. On the front were a series of large drill bits, all turned and facing inwards, like a monster's jutting teeth.

"That's right," Leader said. "It's one of the only machines we have down here. We've tried everything we can think of to get it to work, but

nothing works. We backward engineered it as best we can, but the technology is so advanced it's difficult to make much progress. It's like having half the instructions, and having to figure the rest out yourself but without really being able to understand the first half in the first place."

"Whoever built this digger did a good job," Jeremiah said.

"Our engineers restored it," Leader said. "We've tried oil, tried heating it and running it through the system again, but each time we try, it just blows up. Now we need to come up with a different system. Something we can use to convert energy."

Jeremiah smiled.

"It appears my being here may not have been entirely by chance," he said. "I am, or was, an engineer. I'm sure I can come up with a power system that will make it run."

"You could?" Leader said.

"Oh yes," Jeremiah said. "It shouldn't be that difficult. All we'd need is a converter to turn energy into electrical energy. We probably have most of the materials here already. Though some of your people might have to provide the power we need."

"We are at your disposal," Leader said, bowing low. "Anything you need shall be yours. Just name it. I'll get some workers to move the digger into the castle."

He left to make arrangements. Graham sidled up to Jeremiah.

"Are you sure you can do this?" he said.

"I was an engineer in the Air Force for thirty years," Jeremiah said. "I should be able to knock something together."

Graham wanted to cry with relief.

"You mean, we're going home?" he said.

"Yes," Jeremiah said. "With a little elbow grease, we're going home."

# Chapter Sixteen

THE DIGGER had been set up in the middle of the room, with tools of every shape and size arranged around it. There was nothing quite like a new wrench set, unblemished and untouched by any hand but the one that had made it. Jeremiah picked up a 3/8” wrench and felt the weight in his hand, like a samurai holding a great sword. He’d forgotten just how good it felt. He could make out little chips in the wrench’s surface from where it had been hand-crafted.

“Everything you requested is here,” Leader said.

Jeremiah cast an eye over the materials.

“Woah, hold on Chief,” Jeremiah said. “Magnets. Where are the magnets?”

“We’re searching through the items in the museum now,” Leader said. “Please continue to build until we have them.”

He left.

“They’re very hospitable, aren’t they?” Graham said.

“Can you blame them?” Jeremiah said. “With a machine to dig for them, it’ll make their work a lot easier. No more backbreaking labor.”

“But it’s only one machine,” Graham said. “They’re digging lots of tunnels out there.”

“We would only need one machine,” Jeremiah said. “It could do the work of a thousand men.”

“How long do you think it’ll take to build?” Graham said.

“Most of the machine is ready,” Jeremiah said. “We just need to build the power converter. A day. Maybe two.”

“That long?” Graham said.

“There’s no one who can build it faster,” Jeremiah said. “Believe me.”

“If you weren’t so decrepit and old, I might have believed you,” Graham said.

“You could show your only hope of getting out of here within your lifetime a little respect,” Jeremiah said.

Graham bowed down.

“Yes, Master,” he said, before sitting down in one of the tall-backed dining chairs.

“Jack up the backend, will you,” Jeremiah said, shrugging off his coat.

“Who?” Graham said. “Me?”

“No, the Easter Bunny,” Jeremiah said. “Of course you.”

“Jack up?” Graham said.

“It means lift up with the use of a device called a jack,” Jeremiah said.

“I know what it means,” Graham said. “But why am I the one who has to do it?”

“Can you see anyone else here?” Jeremiah said.

“I’m not your lackey,” Graham said.

“You’re my assistant,” Jeremiah said. “Jack up the backend.”

“What are you going to do?” Graham said.

“I’m going to take a look at the engine and see what we’ve got here,” Jeremiah said. “That is unless you want to take a look at it?”

Graham glanced at the engine. He clearly didn’t know the front from the back.

“I didn’t think so,” Jeremiah said.

Graham dragged the jack over to the underside of the digger and began to pump.

“How long do you think it’ll take the digger to reach the surface?” he said.

“Not long I should think,” Jeremiah said. “If it’s running at full power it could go through up to one thirty meters of soil an hour. Maybe more. So it won’t take more than a few hours.”

“Why do you think that?” Graham said, already sweating from the effort.

“Because we didn’t fall that far,” Jeremiah said.

“Felt a long way to me,” Graham said, leaning on the jack and wiping his brow. “And Leader said they’ve been digging for three hundred years.”

“It doesn’t matter how long you dig if you’re digging in the wrong direction,” Jeremiah said. “We’re no more than a few hundred meters below the surface at the most.”

“How can you possibly know that?” Graham said.

“When we fell earlier, we couldn’t have fallen for more than fifty seconds, a minute tops,” Jeremiah said.

“Yeah, so?” Graham said.

“So, don’t you remember your high school physics?” Jeremiah said.

“No,” Graham said. “I’m surprised you do.”

“Look, if we fell for one second the force of gravity pulls at almost ten meters per second per second,” Jeremiah said. “We didn’t fall straight down. We slid most of it, so if we round down we’d end up with…”

He muttered under his breath, eyes moving left to right as he worked out the calculations in his head.

“Three hundred meters,” Jeremiah said. “Maximum.”

“Still a long way though, isn’t it?” Graham said.

“It’s not a short distance, but it could be worse,” Jeremiah said. “A lot worse. Who knows where we could have ended up. I say we’re pretty lucky.”

“But if we’re so close to the surface, why haven’t they found a way up there yet?” Graham said.

“That’s the very question I’ve been asking myself,” Jeremiah said. “Come on, let’s get to work.”

# Chapter Seventeen

THEY WORKED all day without taking a break, entering the zone where nothing came between them but the task in hand. Leader's servants came periodically to bring food and drink. The two men didn't chat to them or take their eyes from the machinery they were working on. Their only concern was putting the machine together so they could return home.

The digger's engine was in pieces on the floor, organized in a way Graham didn't understand, but made perfect sense to Jeremiah. The old man ignored Graham every time he tried to initiate conversation, grumbling under his breath and concentrating on the parts on the floor.

Graham had smudges of oil and dirt on his face, hands and clothes.

"Why am I always the one getting dumped on?" Graham said.

"Because you're unskilled," Jeremiah said. "Expendable."

"Gee, thanks," Graham said. "It's always nice to feel an intrinsic part of the project."

The main doors opened and Leader came in, walking in his slow gait. A guard was in his wake.

"These are all the magnets we found," Leader said.

The guard held a small pile in his hands.

"This is it?" Jeremiah said.

"It's all we could find," Leader said.

"This isn't enough," Jeremiah said. "We need a lot more than this."

"We don't have more," Leader said. "I have people combing the town, but this is all we've found so far."

Jeremiah's shoulders sagged and he fell into a dining room chair.

"Then we're stuck here," he said. "We can't get out of here without magnets."

Graham kicked at the machine's large wheels, venting his anger. A large bolt fell off and hit him on the head. He rubbed his head and scowled. He gritted his teeth and unleashed another wave of anger at the machine.

# Chapter Eighteen

GRAHAM LAID his forehead on the table and let out a groan. His brain hurt from all the pressure he was putting on it.

"What if we put a current through the magnets we do have?" Graham said. "That'll make them stronger, right?"

"Yes," Jeremiah said. "But that's what we need the magnets for in the first place – to make power."

Graham let out a groan.

"I can't believe we're stuck down here because of fridge magnets," he said. "I've got a ton at home."

He stood up.

"No!" he said. "I refuse to be beaten by this."

He paced up and down the room. He stopped, looked at the machine, and then turned to face Jeremiah.

"What if…" he said, before trailing off and shaking his head. "I've got nothing."

"If I don't get back soon they're going to demolish my house," Jeremiah said.

"You don't know that," Graham said.

"But I do know it," Jeremiah said. "They'll find I'm not there, see the hole and assume the worst. They won't spend much time looking for me. They'll fill the hole in and demolish the house. And that'll be it. If you don't get back, what happens? Nothing."

"I don't want to spend the rest of my life down here," Graham said.

"You think I do?" Jeremiah said.

"At least you don't have much time left to wait," Graham said.

They were silent a moment.

"My boss said he heard rumors about you back in town," Graham said.

"Oh?" Jeremiah said.

"A rumor about what happened to your wife," Graham said. "One day she just up and vanished."

Jeremiah didn't respond.

"So there's no truth to it?" Graham said.

"There's always some truth," Jeremiah said. "Even to rumors."

"Then what did happen to your wife?" Graham said.

“I murdered her,” Jeremiah said. “And then I diced her up and buried her in the Outback. Depending on which version you hear.”

Graham couldn’t tell if Jeremiah was joking or not.

“The cops would have arrested you if it were true,” Graham said.

“Not if there wasn’t enough evidence,” Jeremiah said.

“They would have searched your house top to bottom,” Graham said. “They would have found something.”

“They didn’t,” Jeremiah said.

Graham gulped.

“They searched your home?” he said.

“Top to bottom, as you said,” Jeremiah said. “Even the police have to act on rumors.”

“I used to come to your house, you know,” Graham said.

“I know,” Jeremiah said. “Snooping around. I still don’t know what you were looking for.”

“I meant when I was a kid,” Graham said. “Don’t you recognize me?”

Jeremiah looked at Graham close, but there was no recognition there.

“No,” he said.

“I was Stuart’s friend,” Graham said. “There are pictures of me in your photo albums. I used to come over at the weekends and play. You would cook big breakfasts for us.”

Jeremiah’s eyes moved to the side. He remembered something.

“Stuart had a lot of friends,” he said.

“You really don’t remember me?” Graham said.

“I said I didn’t, didn’t I?” Jeremiah said.

“I remember you,” Graham said. “You weren’t always this grumpy. You were fun and carefree, once upon a time.”

“That was a long time ago,” Jeremiah said.

“What happened to you?” Graham said.

“Life happened,” Jeremiah said.

“Your wife was alive then,” Graham said. “You were different.”

“We all were,” Jeremiah said.

“But you especially,” Graham said. “Maybe if you were more social people wouldn’t make up stories about you so much.”

“You think I care what they think?” Jeremiah said. “I don’t care. People will say and do what they want. I’m not a part of their lives any more than they’re a part of mine. I just want to get back home.”

“I keep in touch with him, you know,” Graham said.

“With who?” Jeremiah said.

“With Stuart,” Graham said.

Jeremiah blinked, casting an eye over Graham.

“Only by social media,” Graham said. “We’re not close. But I see his newsfeed from time to time. He’s doing all right.”

“That’s nice,” Jeremiah said.

“He changed companies,” Graham said. “He has a kid. A little boy.”

“That’s nice,” Jeremiah said.

He repeated the words with the same studied tone of voice.

“You didn’t know that before I told you, did you?” Graham said. “That your son has a son.”

Jeremiah said nothing.

“Why don’t you talk anymore?” Graham said.

“That’s none of your business,” Jeremiah said.

“There’s no reason to be so uptight, Jerry,” Graham said.

“Don’t call me Jerry,” Jeremiah said.

“Jerry, Jerry, Jerry,” Graham said.

Jeremiah turned with deliberate slowness toward Graham, his eyebrow cocked.

“Now I know what pushes your buttons I’ll just keep pushing them, unless you talk to me,” Graham said.

“You’re really annoying,” Jeremiah said.

“You only just noticed that?” Graham said.

“No wonder you don’t have any friends,” Jeremiah said.

“Look who’s talking,” Graham said.

“As we’re becoming new best buddies, be honest with me,” Jeremiah said.

“I’ve been nothing but honest with you since we came down here,” Graham said.

“Then maybe you’d be kind enough to tell me what you were doing in my house the night we sank,” Jeremiah said. “You weren’t housekeeping, I know that much.”

Graham turned his head to one side.

“I was… investigating a few things,” he said.

“What things?” Jeremiah said.

“I know what my company was trying to do to you and your land,” Graham said. “I couldn’t just sit by and watch them take everything from you.”

“Oh, so you were on my side, ay?” Jeremiah said. “That’s a turn up for the books.”

“Sometimes in my line of work it helps to have one face for some people, another for others,” Graham said.

“How am I supposed to know this face you’re showing me now is the real one?” Jeremiah said.

“What reason do I have to lie to you?” Graham said.

“Oh, I’d say you have plenty of reasons,” Jeremiah said. “About half a million, in fact.”

“Your property’s not worth anywhere near that,” Graham said.

“Financially, maybe not,” Jeremiah said. “But it means a lot more to me than just money.”

“Don’t you want to retire in a nice old folks’ home?” Graham said. “I know if I were you, that’s where I’d want to be. You can socialize, meet new people, make new friends. Maybe even get yourself a girlfriend.”

“Do I look like I want a girlfriend?” Jeremiah said.

Graham sighed. He looked out the window, down on the town below.

“Looks like they’re preparing something out there,” he said.

“Probably the cooking pot for when we fail to come up with something,” Jeremiah said.

“Listen to Mister Upbeat over here,” Graham said. “You don’t always have to think everything is against you, you know.”

“Why not?” Jeremiah said. “It’s how it usually goes.”

Jeremiah pressed his nose to the glass. Big drums with oil in them had been lit, all over the town. People were emerging out onto the street and heading toward the castle.

“It’s no good us being cooped up in here,” Graham said. “We should go for a walk, take some time out. Maybe the solution will come to us.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Jeremiah said. “At least it’ll make us tender for the cook pot. I’d hate to be gamey.”

# Chapter Nineteen

THE LOCAL little men and women glanced at these two Surfacers but were quick to look away. The guards eyed the locals with stern glares, and followed Graham and Jeremiah every step they took.

"Tell me," Jeremiah said to Graham. "Do you feel like a VIP or a VDP?"

"What's the D for?" Graham said.

"Dangerous," Jeremiah said.

"They're just doing their job," Graham said.

But he had to admit, it was strange. It was like they were celebrities. Unfortunately it was for committing a mass murder rather than something progressive. As they headed into town the guards formed a tight circle around them and buffeted aside anyone who didn't get out of the way fast enough.

"This is certainly going to make us popular with the locals," Jeremiah said.

The town folk were gathered in the center of town, around a large platform. Leader took to the stage.

"As I'm sure you've all heard, we have been sent two Surfacers and they are working on completing a digger for us," Leader said. "Soon we will emerge from this earthy darkness and take our place once more on the surface alongside our brothers and sisters."

"No pressure," Graham mumbled.

"We must prepare to be welcomed by them with open arms," Leader said. "They have long been awaiting our return, just as we have been awaiting theirs. Today, we celebrate an end to darkness and fear and welcome the light."

The big drums kicked off the party. Some of the entertainers were dressed in costumes, others on stilts with masks and long robes. Even with this height advantage they were no taller than Graham and Jeremiah.

"We should head this way," Jeremiah said. "Away from the crowd."

"But the party's kicking off," Graham said. "And it's in our honor. We should at least show our faces."

Jeremiah sidled up close to Graham.

"There's something I need to tell you," he said.

“What?” Graham said.

Jeremiah nodded toward an empty stretch of road. Graham sighed and looked back at the party one more time before following the old man. The guards maintained their circle around them at all times.

“All right, so what is it?” Graham said.

“Not here,” Jeremiah said. “Someone in the houses might be listening.”

They headed toward one of the tunnel entrances.

“Now is it safe?” Graham said. “Or shall we seal ourselves in one of these tunnels first?”

Jeremiah checked over his shoulder that the coast was clear.

“I lied earlier about the amulet,” he said.

“Amulet?” Graham said. “What amulet?”

“I told Leader the amulet gives luck to its wearer,” Jeremiah said. “I lied. It doesn’t say that.”

“What does it say?” Graham said.

“‘Believe not he who wears this ornament’,” Jeremiah said.

“What do you mean?” Graham said.

“That’s what it says,” Jeremiah said.

“But why lie?” Graham said.

“I’m not sure it’s wise to tell the person with that warning around his neck the truth, do you?” Jeremiah said.

“But it might not be referring to Leader,” Graham said. “Who knows who it might have belonged to before.”

“But it’s a good way to pass on a message to all those who come in contact with these people,” Jeremiah said. “Don’t you think? To warn them of possible danger.”

“Danger?” Graham said. “From these little people? What kind of danger?”

“I don’t know,” Jeremiah said. “But it stands to reason. And how do we know the leader doesn’t already know its meaning? What if it was a test to see if I’m honest?”

“Are you always this suspicious?” Graham said. “No wonder you don’t have any friends. I’m sure us whispering to each other is allaying their fears if they are watching us. Let’s get back to the party before it’s over.”

*Ting!*

Jeremiah turned to see one of the guards put his hand to his sword and pull it away from the wall, away from a black glassy rock. Jeremiah

frowned at it.

“What kind of rock is this?” he said.

“We call it ‘sticky rock’,” the guard said. “It sticks to metal.”

“May I?” Jeremiah said, reaching for the guard’s sword.

The guard glanced at the other guards before handing it over. Jeremiah held the sword up and moved it closer to the black rock. When it was a few inches away, it pulled the sword toward it.

“Eureka,” Jeremiah said.

“What?” Graham said. “What is it?”

“This rock,” Jeremiah said. “It isn’t just any rock. It’s a magnetite.”

“Which is what, in everyday English?” Graham said.

“A magnet,” Jeremiah said. “We just found our missing piece.”

# Chapter Twenty

THE GUARDS carried huge lumps of the metallic rock back to the castle. The rock was already festooned with iron dust, coins, and a dozen other small nik naks it'd picked up along the way.

Graham slowed down to watch the festivities.

"What are you doing?" Jeremiah said.

"I might join the party," Graham said.

"Are you sure that's wise?" Jeremiah said.

"Who cares if it's wise?" Graham said. "It looks fun!"

The people had big smiles and red cheeks from drinking a purple liquid. The music was at a high tempo, colorful and exciting. Half the crowd turned to look at him, their mouths dropping open.

"I'm heading back," Jeremiah said. "So we can get back as soon as possible."

"I'll join you later," Graham said.

He crossed the bridge that led to the town square, the guards clearing a path around him, keeping the revelers back.

"You don't need to push everyone away," Graham said. "Just let them do their celebration."

But the guards paid no attention to Graham, and continued to push the locals back.

There were circus performers, tumblers, acrobats, jugglers, and men on stilts who stepped over people in the crowd. The festivities continued, but lacked the energy they had before Graham had arrived. He could tell by the locals' expressions and glances he was about as welcome as a father at his teenage daughter's birthday party.

Graham sighed and turned to head back toward the castle. As he left, the music picked up and the cheers from the crowd grew louder.

He stopped at the castle entrance.

"I, uh, need the toilet," he said.

A pair of guards led him toward the restrooms off a separate corridor. The guards waited on either side of the door as Graham entered. He closed the door behind himself and approached the window. He pushed it open. He climbed out and crouched down, creeping behind a row of shacks. He

edged along the wall. The houses were silent. People weren't here, instead preferring to be in the thick of the party.

A little man took off his stilts and leaned them against a shack. He took off his long coat and hung it over the top of a door, the mask tucked in its pocket. It was so long it touched the ground. Just the right height for Graham.

He got on his hands and knees and crawled along the side of the shack. He ever so gently lifted the coat. He crept behind the house, put on the coat and mask, and lifted his collar up. He took a deep breath and stepped out into the street. He waited for someone to spot him. Someone did.

A bunch of kids ran at him, screaming and shouting. Graham looked from them to the adults watching with smiles on their faces. Graham danced, twirling his legs around like they were stilts. The kids laughed and cheered, chasing after him.

Graham entered the town square. He came face to face with another man on stilts. They leaned forward and stared at one another. They scratched their chins as if in thoughtful repose, and then made a slow circle in mirror image. They made faces in an attempt to scare each other, and then pushed in a friendly wrestling match. Graham had a greater mass, and easily pushed the other little figure back. He landed on a crowd of people. They braced him with their hands and pushed him back upright.

They continued to wrestle and again Graham easily pushed the other figure over. The crowd roared and danced on the spot. Graham raised his arms in victory. He was led to the center, where he bowed down and received a gold medal. The crowd cheered.

The little men gestured to a throne, and Graham took a seat. A place of honor. Sat on the other seats were the victors of their own competitions. There was a tap on his shoulder.

"Excuse me," a little voice said.

A cute little girl with big eyes and pigtails stood looking up at him. She barely reached his knees.

"The winner should come this way," she said.

Graham got up and followed the little girl.

"Just lead the way," he said.

She led him from the festivities and down a narrow street.

"Just where are we going?" Graham said.

The little girl came to a stop. Graham realized how quiet the street was. There wasn't another soul around.

"I'm going to head back," Graham said.

He turned, and his face was smothered with a thick bag.

# Chapter Twenty-One

WITH THE metallic rock now in his possession Jeremiah set to finishing the machine. He polished it so the surface shone bright. Then he wrapped the wire around it. Happy with the result, he sat it to one side. The digger looked a mess, like he'd demolished it. But sometimes you needed to destroy something before you could rebuild it again.

A cheer erupted in the town square outside. Jeremiah had to admit, the party festivities did sound fun… No. He wouldn't go out there. Once, he wouldn't have thought twice about joining a street party, but at some point he had lost touch with civilization. He no longer felt comfortable in it. Besides, he didn't need it. All he needed was to go home.

Jeremiah let out a sigh. Despite being deep underground he was no worse off than when he was on the surface. He kept to himself, not letting anyone get close. The only thing he really missed was his beloved eucalyptus tree. If it wasn't for that, he'd have been just as happy down here. What did that say about his life?

Graham's casual comment about Stuart had rocked him to his core, and it had been all he could do not to ask how his son was doing, how his grandson was. How trivial the root of an argument seemed with the perspective of years.

Though Jeremiah's fingers were large and knotted around the knuckles, the skills came back to him quickly. He was making good progress and should finish the machine ahead of schedule. No thanks to Graham. The big quitter.

The music outside built to a crescendo and Jeremiah turned to look at the crowd. What would these people even do up on the surface? They had no skills, no way to function in the modern world. They would find themselves in a new bubble. But what concern was that of his? He would get the digger done. His eucalyptus tree depended on him.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

CLEARLY HIS disguise hadn't fooled everyone. Graham's joints had once again been locked by a team of tiny bodies, before dragging him away. For little people they certainly were strong.

He was now sat on a chair with a bag on his head. He wasn't tied up. He heard a door open and close, and people whispering, fidgeting and moving around inside the room.

"I'm going to remove the bag now," a deep voice said. "Please don't panic. We mean you no harm."

The muscles in Graham's limbs tightened, preparing to spring and make a run for it.

The bag was whipped off. A big friendly face with a large nose and wart on his chin beamed at him.

Graham leapt to his feet, banged his head on the roof, and immediately fell back into his seat. He was dazed, almost knocked unconscious.

"Be careful," the little man said. "Don't get up. You'll only hit your head again."

The room swirled around Graham like he was on a Ferris Wheel, the faces and forms of a dozen people floating through his eyes.

"Washer woman 4813, get him a cold towel, quick," the friendly faced man said.

Graham blinked, and then peered around at his surroundings. He was sat in the front room of a small house. Even prone in the tiny child-like chair as he was, his head almost grazed the roof. It was like living in a child's model house. The people before him looked like average little people, but there was a similarity in the features. Casting his eyes around at the photo frames confirmed they were a family. There were even marks on the doorframe showing how tall each of the kids were at various stages of their life.

Two of the kids dug at the walls with tiny shovels. Their mother picked them up and held them in her arms.

"They're your kids?" Graham said.

"I hope so," the little man said. "Otherwise I'm going to have a stern word with my wife. They're diggers, born and bred."

A cold towel was placed on Graham's head, a large knot already forming.

"Can I help you?" Graham said.

The family looked at one another with solemn expressions. The eldest figure stood before him.

"I'm afraid you've come to a dangerous place," the little man said.

Graham glanced around.

"Doesn't look very dangerous to me," he said.

"Not here," the little man said. "In the castle. Leader is not what he seems."

The door was just behind the little man. Graham could easily knock him aside and make a run for it, though he suspected his legs might still give way beneath him.

"Leader might appear friendly," the little man said. "But he's not. He's evil, manipulative, and controlling."

"He seems nice enough to me," Graham said.

"That's exactly it," the little man said. "Him and his ancestors have been ruling since before we came down here, since we were a tribe called Manu."

"Leader said your old tribe name had been forgotten," Graham said.

"It hasn't," the little man said. "They tried to make us forget, but we never will. We were called the Manu. In our tribe's language, our name meant 'empty fist'. It's about the only words of our original language we remember. There's a foulness in Leader's blood. It's because of him and his ancestors we got sucked down here in the first place."

"Whoa, whoa," Graham said. "Back up. What are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry," the little man said. "I forgot you are a stranger here. First, let me introduce myself. I am Chief Digger 138. It is my job to decide which direction to dig."

"You've done a swell job so far," Graham said.

"Leader wants us to forget our past," Digger 138 said, "to forget our past and what we once were. But we still pass our history down from parent to child, to share in the old ways, but it's difficult. The guards watch us every moment and it's hard to get away. Sometimes some of us must make a sacrifice not to enjoy the ceremonies so others can."

There was a sound outside, of shouting voices, and the father nodded to one of his sons, who pushed aside the curtain and peered out.

“It’s just Cook 3897,” the little boy said. “Overexcited as usual.”

“Five hundred years ago, when we were on the surface, our tribe met white people,” Digger 138 said. “This is why we now speak English. They had technology and weapons unlike anything we had ever seen. It was like magic to us. And we revered the white man like a God. But they explained it was not magic, but exploiting the rules of nature and the universe. Our ancestors tried to replicate the technology of the white people, but they couldn’t.

“And when they saw a map of the world, how big it was, and how small our part of it was, our Leader developed a hunger for more. But he knew we could not achieve this with just one tribe. They would need all the tribes united to create a force great enough to take on another, foreign nation. And so they sent envoys, spies, to get information on these other nations, their technological level, their friendship with other nations, everything they could discover.

“Meanwhile, our Leader met the other tribe leaders. He convinced some to join. Those who did not were later forced to join us. They were given a choice: become warriors, or be killed. Their wives would be given to great warriors, and they would breed a mighty army.

“But our Leader was still not happy. With so many leaders, who was the supreme leader? Who would lead our army? And so they created army games, ways to test and educate and learn. They bred a supreme general, who would lead us into war.

“We became a warrior race. But our weakness was technology. Advancement took time, and great minds. We had some who were gifted with technology, and they were given pride of place. The same with the ship builders, who crafted stronger and faster ships, and our greatest miners who were capable of discovering valuable materials for our ships and weapons. They were all treated with the utmost respect and given practically anything they wanted. Theirs was a life of servitude. It was a good life.

“During this time the white men were still trading with us. They saw our tribe grow in strength and power, but if they were alarmed, they didn’t show it. One trader gave our leaders a gold medallion as a sign of respect of our rapid development. Our leader still wears one today.

“The research reports came back, and the weak cities and nations were sifted from the strong, until they came up with a shortlist of three nations.

But they were not hasty. The impatient spider does not get the fly, and they knew the importance of a first-strike. None knew of us, this growing power, for we were hidden amongst the long grass and trees. And we were little people. Many would not have believed us dangerous. When we struck, it would be swift and hard.

“Then disaster struck. To build all the machines for war we dug deep into the earth beneath our feet, deeper and deeper. And it was this greed for power that swallowed our islands. We were consumed. All our great warriors, and all our powerful ships, were lost, pulled into the earth as if they had never existed at all.

“The old factions came through. Blood was spilled, each blaming the other for our current situation. We fought hard against one another. If it was not for our leader, we would have destroyed ourselves within those first few days.

“He said we must forget all that happened to us, all that we were. That we must become something more. And he used the warlord spirit we had fostered to create the culture you see now. Our Leaders never forgot their purpose. They still believe they are destined to return to the surface and rule, to become what they always had the potential to be: warlords.”

“What’s all this got to do with me?” Graham said.

“You can’t finish building the digging machine,” Digger 138 said. “If you do, it will not end well for those on the surface.”

“Our governments have powerful armies and weapons,” Graham said. “I’m sure they can control a few little men.”

“Leader has a warped mind, twisted by anger and foul blood over centuries of inbreeding,” Digger 138 said. “He has a plan to achieve what we failed to do all those years ago.”

“What plan?” Graham said.

“We don’t know,” Digger 138 said. “No one is allowed to get close to him. The guards keep everyone away, and any attempts to discover his plan have resulted in failure. They are too powerful and we too weak. The good news is the technology that keeps them from attacking the surface is the same that keeps us down here. So long as we stay down here, the Surfacers are safe. It is a sacrifice we willingly pay.

“Another Surfacer, many years ago, came to us, and he began to build the machine. We managed to kidnap him and tell him everything we have

told you. Luckily, he hadn't finished building the machine. There was still one part of the digger left to make. He ran."

"Fat lot of good it did him," Graham said. "There's no way out of here."

"Oh, but there is," Digger 138 said. "We already found a tunnel to the surface. My great great great great great grandfather found it one day while digging. But we can't use it for fear the guards will notice those missing and question where we went. We keep the tunnel open for when we do emerge onto the surface. After we overthrow Leader and take charge of our own destiny. We just want somewhere safe to live out our days like anyone else. Leader is the one who wants revenge. Not us."

"Where does the tunnel open onto?" Graham said.

"We don't know," Digger 138 said. "We daren't look. Any evidence that one of us has been to the surface could spell disaster."

"Why are you telling me this if I can't use it?" Graham said.

"Because maybe you can," Digger 138 said. "A few years ago we came across a pair of Surfacer bodies, buried deep. If you make your escape, we can pretend these bodies are you and your friend. We'll stay down here until we overthrow Leader and emerge as free men and no danger to the Surfacers."

"Can you give me a map or directions to this exit?" Graham said.

"No," Digger 138 said. "We did that before, and it was only the man's sweat that saved us. His sweat smudged the map we drew on his palm. The guards thought it was just oil. We were lucky. We might not get so lucky next time. If they find the map and follow it to the exit…"

He shook his head.

"But you must leave," he said. "Right now. Which of the two of you has the greatest knowledge of mechanics?"

It took Graham just a moment to compose his response.

"I do," he said. "The old man is just dead weight. I'm the engineer. We should leave him here."

"Are you sure?" Digger 138 said. "He'll be trapped down here until we can emerge up on the surface."

"He would want it this way," Graham said.

He was surprised he managed to keep his voice and gaze level. He would escape and tell someone about his adventure, for sure. Whether they decided to take action or not was entirely out of his control.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

JEREMIAH'S KNEES were sore from bending down, and his back ached. The doors at the end of the hall opened and Leader came in. His cape flapped around him like a full set of billowing sails. He peered at the remaining pieces on the floor. If he was concerned he didn't show it.

"How's it going?" Leader said.

"It's going fine," Jeremiah said. "It shouldn't take any more than a few hours now."

"Excellent," Leader said. "Where's your friend?"

"He went to join in the festivities," Jeremiah said.

"You're not interested?" Leader said.

"I'd prefer to get the job done and go home," Jeremiah said.

"A man after my own heart," Leader said. "It is better to have a goal and strive for it than to let yourself wallow in mediocrity, don't you find?"

"Sure…" Jeremiah said. "Or something like that."

"What'll you do when you get home?" Leader said. "Do you have a family?"

"I used to," Jeremiah said. "Now it's just me."

"The greatest men always do things themselves," Leader said. "They might work with others, might listen to their counsel, but it is that one person's vision that counts."

"You'll be giving up a lot," Jeremiah said. "In letting your people go up onto the surface. You'll no longer be their leader."

"I will always be their leader," Leader said. "But it is our destiny to rise. I must thank you for making all this possible. Without you, it would likely take us hundreds more years."

"I'm glad I could do my part," Jeremiah said. "If you don't mind, I should get back to work."

"Of course," Leader said, floating back to the door.

Jeremiah felt a shiver run through him. Why did he feel like he and Leader had been talking at cross purposes?

# Chapter Twenty-Four

THE PARTY was still in full swing when Graham and Digger 138 headed into a tunnel on the western side. Everyone was having too much fun to notice. They turned a corner in the tunnel and the music of the party faded. They made left and right turns, so many Graham couldn't keep track. The little man knew the tunnels like the back of his hand which, coming to think of it, wasn't so difficult considering how small they were.

"Do you have a family on the surface?" Digger 138 said.

"No," Graham said. "I have parents and cousins, but I'm not married with kids."

"Still, it must be good to be heading back," Digger 138 said.

The initial excitement Graham felt had given way to a nagging pinching sensation in his stomach. He ignored it, but the farther into the tunnel he went, the sharper the sting in his belly.

"I hope to live on the surface one day," Digger 138 said. "But for all my dreams, I have little idea what the surface even looks like. Can you describe it to me?"

"That's a hard thing to do," Graham said. "I'm not a poet, so words fail me."

"Is it like magic?" Digger 138 said. "I imagine it's like magic. To see a big ball of light in the sky every day without having to turn it on."

"You mean the sun?" Graham said. "You never really think about it. It's always there."

"What about the stars?" Digger 138 said. "My father used to say the sky at night is bright because of all the candles in the sky, like the town during a celebration."

"It's not quite like that," Graham said. "The stars are far away and the light they emit is tiny."

"Oh," Digger 138 said, disappointed.

"But the moon is bright," Graham said.

"The moon?" Digger 138 said.

"It's a big ball in the sky, a silver-white color," Graham said. "Sometimes it's red."

"Wow," Digger 138 said. "I'd love to see that one day."

“I’m sure you will,” Graham said. “Can we take a break for a minute? I need a rest.”

It was a lie, of course. He could have kept going for days if he knew he was going to be able to get out of there. But he needed to organize his thoughts. They were beginning to bother him. They took a seat on a pair of large rounded stones. Digger 138 took some food out of his bag and offered it to Graham, who waved it away.

“I’ll miss here too, of course,” Digger 138 said. “The silence, mostly. The calm.”

“Why does it have to be one or the other?” Graham said. “You could travel between the two. The surface and underground.”

“I suppose,” Digger 138 said. “But that would mean living near an entrance to a tunnel. And what happens if I get trapped underground again? It’s not worth the risk.”

“Why are you helping me?” Graham said. “You didn’t have to. You don’t know the people on the surface. You could just leave us all to it.”

“Because we are all of us brothers and sisters,” Digger 138 said. “If we don’t look out for each other, who will?”

Graham nodded. He leaned forward and let out a sigh. Now he knew what the twisting pain in his stomach was. It was guilt. The sense he was letting Jeremiah down. Why he should think like that, when the old fart didn’t have a kind bone in his body, he wasn’t sure.

For all he’d done in the past he’d never really thrown someone under the bus before, not intentionally and with his own hand. It’d always been indirect, or in a way so he could lie to himself about his innocence, that the situation had been unavoidable, like missing a deadline or ‘forgetting’ to make the necessary phone call. But now he was intentionally leaving an old man to his doom. It was on another level, and it was one he wasn’t altogether comfortable with.

“Right,” Graham said. “And I wish you weren’t.”

He got up and began walking back down the tunnel.

“Where are you going?” Digger 138 said. “The exit’s this way.”

“Yes, but my friend is this way,” Graham said.

The twisting sensation remained in his stomach all the way back to town, only now it was of concern. For himself and what he was letting himself in for.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

A PAIR OF guards stood outside the bathroom.

“Do you think he’s all right in there?” Guard 668 said. “He’s been in there an awfully long time.”

“Maybe Surfacers do it differently to us,” Guard 896 said.

“How differently could they do it?” Guard 668 said.

“I don’t know, do I?” Guard 896 said. “I do it the regular way.”

They were silent a moment.

“I sometimes stand on one leg when I go,” Guard 668 said.

“What for?” Guard 896 said.

“I don’t know,” Guard 668 said. “It just seems to flow a lot easier.”

“Huh,” Guard 896 said. “I’ll have to try that one of these days.”

“Do you reckon that’s how he’s doing it in there?” Guard 668 said.

“How long does it usually take you when you stand on one leg?” Guard 896 said.

“Not long,” Guard 668 said. “About the same as usual.”

“That can’t be it then, can it?” Guard 896 said.

“All this talk has made me need to go now,” Guard 668 said, squirming.

The door opened.

“At ease, gentlemen,” Graham said, walking down the corridor.

“Are you going to ask him, or shall I?” Guard 896 said.

# Chapter Twenty-Six

JEREMIAH PUT the final few pieces together and slid them into the back of the digger. It was finished. He smiled to himself and dusted off his hands. A job well done.

The doors opened and Graham entered.

“Don’t tell me you’ve finished it?” Graham said.

“Incredible what you can do when you don’t let yourself get distracted,” Jeremiah said.

“Believe me, now isn’t the time to be boasting about efficiency,” Graham said.

“So, you finally decided to come back,” Jeremiah said. “Just in time to hog the glory.”

Graham blinked.

“Sorry?” he said.

“You should be,” Jeremiah said. “Leaving an old man like that. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“How did you know…” Graham shook his head. “I came back, didn’t I?”

“Not before you had your fun,” Jeremiah said. “Well, if you think I’m going to share the glory, you can think again.”

“What are you talking about?” Graham said.

“What are *you* talking about?” Jeremiah said.

“We don’t have time for this,” Graham said. “Jeremiah, there’s something I need to tell you…”

“Ah! I see you’re done!” Leader said, entering the room. “She looks marvelous.”

“What, this?” Graham said. “She’s not done, not by a long shot.”

“Actually, she’s just about-” Jeremiah said.

Graham wrapped his arm around Jeremiah’s shoulders.

“Listen to him, getting your hopes up,” Graham said. “He’s a cheeky sod. If you’ll excuse us, we need to get back to work.”

“Graham,” Jeremiah said. “What are you-?”

“Jeremiah, can I have a private word for a moment?” Graham said.

Leader, curious, cocked his head to one side.

“I think I just found a problem with the machine,” Graham said. “It would be very embarrassing if we were to turn it on and it doesn’t work.”

Leader nodded.

“Take all the time you need,” he said.

Graham took Jeremiah aside.

“What problem?” Jeremiah said. “You don’t know the difference between a screw and a bolt.”

“How close are you to finishing?” Graham said.

“I’m done,” Jeremiah said. “I just need to press the power button and it’s a go.”

“I wish you hadn’t said that,” Graham said.

“What?” Jeremiah said. “Why?”

“I don’t have time to explain now, but I need you to pretend like you need more time to finish it. Can you do that?”

Jeremiah looked askance at Graham.

“Please,” Graham said. “This is really important. I swear I’ll explain as soon as Leader’s gone.”

“All right,” Jeremiah said.

They turned and approached Leader, who was pressing and probing the machine.

“You’ve done a wonderful job,” Leader said as Jeremiah approached.

“Alas, not as wonderful as I’d hoped,” Jeremiah said.

“What do you mean?” Leader said. “You’re finished.”

“I thought I was,” Jeremiah said. “But young Graham here has pointed out something that I hadn’t noticed. I need a little more time to work on it.”

“What’s the problem?” Leader said. “Is it anything my engineers can help you with?”

“No,” Jeremiah said. “I just need a little more time, that’s all. Engineering isn’t just about nuts and bolts, it’s about gut feeling, and my gut isn’t feeling one hundred percent on this machine yet. A little more tinkering and it’ll be done.”

“What do you need to tinker with?” Leader said.

“Just, uh, a few bits and pieces,” Jeremiah said.

Leader placed his hand on the machine, his thumb resting on the big red power button.

“You know, we had another engineer down here once, working on this machine,” he said. “He told us what materials he needed, when he needed help. He was close to finishing and going home for good. But then he turned out to be a… disappointment. It turned out he’d been taking late night walks through town. He met some… unfavorable types, and they told him things that made him stop working on the digger.

“The engineer tried to run, escape, and when we caught him he refused to build the last part of the machine. Despite not being able to go home, he refused. And no matter how hard we tried, we just couldn’t get the machine to work. We never did find out who told him these things, but we maintained a tighter grip on the townsfolk after that. Should the need to know where one of our star engineers was, we could follow them with ease.”

“I wouldn’t turn it on,” Jeremiah said. “You risk breaking the whole machine and it’ll never get working again.”

Leader pursed his lips.

“I’ll take the risk,” he said.

He pressed the power button. The engine chugged. The huge drill bits spun in circles.

“You were saying?” Leader said.

“Yes,” Graham said. “We were saying. We were saying that the digger might work fine right now but there’s no way of telling if it will work for very long. Isn’t that right, Jeremiah?”

“Yes,” Jeremiah said. “That’s right.”

“And how long would this digger last, do you think?” Leader said with a flat expression.

“Anywhere from ten minutes to… one hour,” Jeremiah said.

“We’d best test it out and see how it does, hadn’t we?” Leader said.

Leader clapped his hands and the doors opened. A flood of guards and other little men in purple uniforms surrounded the digger. The guards seized Graham and Jeremiah.

“What are you doing?” Jeremiah said. “I built this so we can all go home.”

“You will go home the moment we return to the surface,” Leader said. “But we won’t be returning in quite the manner you expected.”

The little men in purple uniforms began taking the machine apart.

“What are you doing?” Graham said. “That’s our way back home! Stop!”

“They are backward engineering it,” Leader said.

“Backward engineering?” Jeremiah said. “What for?”

“They’re not going to be able to build their own if they don’t know how this one was put together now, can they?” Leader said.

“Have I skipped a couple of chapters or something?” Jeremiah said. “I don’t understand what’s going on.”

“My men will backward engineer your power converter and add it to our other diggers,” Leader said.

Jeremiah turned pale.

“What other diggers?” he said.

“You didn’t think there was just one digger, did you?” Leader said, a grin spreading across his features.

“You have more?” Graham said. “How many more?”

“Oh, quite enough to do what we need,” Leader said.

“What are you going to do?” Graham said.

“Sometimes in order for some to rise, others must fall,” Leader said.

“You’re insane,” Graham said. “The world won’t sit back and let you do this. They will attack you.”

“They won’t be so quick to attack when they learn we have drills beneath their cities, ready to sink them all unless they meet our demands,” Leader said.

“The world has moved on,” Jeremiah said. “It’s no longer the world you remember. You and your people will die.”

“Perhaps,” Leader said. “But we will die fighting.”

He turned to the guards.

“Take them away,” he said.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

THE GROUND rushed up and high-fived Graham on the cheek with a meaty slap. He got to his feet with a spryness capable only from a man powered by adrenaline. Graham threw himself at the cell door. He waved his arms through the bars and grasped for the guards but they had already moved away.

Jeremiah sat on the bottom bunk of one of two sets of bunkbeds. A pile of torn rags lay on the other. Dark shrouds were cast over the room by a single light in a sconce on the wall.

"This is great," Graham said. "This is just perfect. Now we're in a *prison* in a *hole* in the *ground*!"

"I claim the bottom bunk," Jeremiah said.

"It's all right for you," Graham said.

"What do you mean it's all right for me?" Jeremiah said.

"You'll be underground soon anyway," Graham said. "You might as well get comfortable."

"You're all heart," Jeremiah said.

He lay down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

Graham sighed.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's just… being in here. Locked away. I'm sure you'll stay alive for ages yet. Old grouches always do."

"Is that your idea of an apology?" Jeremiah said.

"Why didn't you come up with something better when I winked at you?" Graham said.

"How was I supposed to know what that meant?" Jeremiah said.

"Everyone knows what a wink means!" Graham said.

"I thought you were coming onto me," Jeremiah said.

"Do you think that's likely?" Graham said.

Jeremiah shrugged.

"I don't know what your type is," he said.

Jeremiah looked into space. His lips trembled, like he wanted to say something. Then he sniffed, and before Graham knew it, the cantankerous old man was crying. He didn't scream or shout. The tears just spilled down his cheeks.

"Hey," Graham said, feeling awkward. "It's okay."

He placed his hand on the old man’s shoulder. “Everything will be all right.”

Jeremiah shrugged Graham’s hand off. He wiped a hand over his face and sneered at Graham.

“This is your fault,” he said.

“What is?” Graham said.

“Us, being down here,” Jeremiah said.

“How did you figure that?” Graham said.

“If it wasn’t for you I’d still be tucked up in my bed, warm and cozy,” Jeremiah said.

“If you hadn’t let your house fall into disrepair we wouldn’t have sunk!” Graham said.

“Sinkholes can form anywhere, anytime,” Jeremiah said. “You know that.”

“Then it’s God’s fault,” Graham said.

Jeremiah scowled, the aged lines forming deep grooves in his face. Then they bent upwards, into a grin. Jeremiah laughed, a hoarse croak, like he was dying from lung disease. He thumbed the tears out of his eyes and took a deep breath.

“I suppose He is to blame for everything,” Jeremiah said. “If you believe such things. He’s the reason I’m down here on me and my wife’s anniversary.”

“Your wife?” Graham said. “But she’s gone.”

“Only physically,” Jeremiah said. “That’s something you’ll never understand until you love someone more than yourself. They never die, not really.”

“I’m sorry,” Graham said. “I had no idea.”

“Of course you didn’t,” Jeremiah said. “How could you? To have someone in your heart and hold them there, forever. That’s why when the doctor said there were things they could do to help her, to relieve some of the pain, certain procedures, certain medicines, and she said she didn’t want any of it, you do your damnedest to make sure she gets what she wants. Even when you can’t sleep at night because she’s tossing and turning and saying horrible, dark things you never thought she knew, you say nothing, letting it wash over you because you love her. ‘If it’s my time to go, it’s my time to go,’ she’d always say.

“You know, there is some truth to the rumor. About me killing and burying her. I didn’t kill her, but I did bury her. Down at the bottom of the garden, beneath the eucalyptus tree.

“That’s where she wanted to be buried. The tree would be her headstone. She didn’t want it carved or damaged. She wanted no sad funeral, none of her friends or family to attend. She didn’t want to be a bother to our son, who lives far away. Those were her wishes. What can you do when the person who you most love in the whole world makes those demands of you?”

Graham nodded, for the first time really seeing the man behind Jeremiah’s surly demeanor.

“But no one believed your story,” he said.

“I didn’t tell anyone,” Jeremiah said. “They might have tried to dig her up. No one would have listened. They’d made up their minds I was guilty before they spoke to me. I was just a lonely, angry old man living out in the sticks. They searched my house, every inch of it, but they didn’t find anything.

“And then my son came around. I would have thought that of everyone, my son would have understood. Of all the people. He was meant to understand. But he didn’t. He wanted to spend time with his mother, to say goodbye. But she couldn’t stand goodbyes. ‘Better to always have the chance of saying hello again one day than saying a final farewell,’ she said.”

“It must be terrible,” Graham said. “To have loved someone your whole life, to know them inside out, and then for them to go like that.”

“She didn’t go,” Jeremiah said. “She was taken. Right when we were going to reap the fruits of our labors. We had retirement plans. We were going to travel the world, see incredible things. But when she left, those things didn’t seem worth doing anymore.”

“Do you ever regret marrying your wife?” Graham said. “If you knew you were going to hurt for so long after she was gone?”

“Not for a second,” Jeremiah said. “I would gladly suffer a thousand lifetimes of pain before sacrificing one minute with her. But I regret the way I’ve lived since she died. All that time… I could have done something, could have helped someone.”

Jeremiah smiled, but it was full of sadness. The man’s world had been torn apart. That was why he didn’t really care about getting out. He had

fallen to a place far deeper and darker than the space he now occupied.

"How is he?" Jeremiah said.

"Who?" Graham said.

"My son," Jeremiah said.

"He's fine," Graham said. "He's working, saving, raising his kid. Surviving. Living."

"Good," Jeremiah said. "I have something for you. As we're at the end of our journey – charming as it was – and never going to get out of here, you might as well have it."

He reached into his jacket and took out some worn papers.

"They're what you were looking for, aren't they?" he said. "The deeds to my property. I keep them on me at all times."

Graham looked at the old man. The thought of lying didn't even cross his mind.

"Yes," he said. "Uh, thanks."

He didn't quite know what to do with them. They really were useless in their current predicament. He folded them up and tucked them in his pocket.

"I realize this perhaps isn't the most use with us down here either," Graham said. "But I thought of a way for you to keep your house."

"You're right," Jeremiah said. "It isn't of any use. I already know a way. I'm staying, and that's that."

"You can believe however much you want that just staying in your house is going to keep you there," Graham said. "But it's not. The courts will rule against you and you'll be forced from your home. They'll knock it down and build on top of it. You'll have no say in the matter."

"Because I'm old?" Jeremiah said.

"Because you don't know the system," Graham said. "It's like an engine. Pull the right cable, connect the right wire, and it stops. Or, you can make it do something it wasn't designed to do."

Jeremiah was quiet for a long time.

"If you help me they'll fire you," he said.

Graham shrugged.

"It was a crappy job anyway," he said. "But even that beats being in here."

"I'll tell you what," Jeremiah said. "If we ever get out of here and back on the surface, you can tell me your plan."

“All right,” Graham said. “Deal.”

He offered his hand. Jeremiah eyed it for several seconds, pressed his lips together, and then shook it.

“You’re still a dipshit, though,” Jeremiah said.

Graham laughed.

“It’s nice to know we’ve done our small part in overthrowing the world, don’t you think?” he said. “Leaves a nice glowing feeling.”

“You didn’t do anything,” Jeremiah said. “It was me who built it.”

“Not only you,” a voice from the corner said.

The mound of rags reassembled themselves into a man. He threw his skinny legs over the side of the bed. He had a big bushy mustache and bright glowing eyes.

“And I’ve had enough of listening to you two petting each other,” he said. “I built most of the machine, so I’ll be the one going to hell, thank you very much. You only added the special ingredient.”

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

“HOW LONG have you been here?” Jeremiah said.

“Almost twenty years,” the mustached man said.

“What’s your name?” Graham said.

“Carlos,” the mustached man said. “Carlos Lopez.”

“How did you come to be down here, Carlos?” Jeremiah said.

“I was out in the Desierto de Tabernas, checking up on an oil pump that wasn’t working as it should,” Carlos said. “It’d been getting stuck often in recent weeks, and kept dredging up bog soil. So, I went down there to dislodge it again. That was when I sank through a sinkhole and couldn’t get out. I got trapped down here. Leader said they were having trouble digging through the soil and needed someone to build a digger. I jumped at the chance.”

“He spun us the same tale,” Graham said. “Did you have any family on the surface?”

“A wife and daughter,” Carlos said. “We weren’t on the best of terms when I left. I swear, if I could change the circumstances of how we parted…”

He shook his head. He’d no doubt suffered this same thought many times in the past.

“Have you tried to escape?” Graham said.

“Many times,” Carlos said. “The locals warned me about Leader and his plans. They drew a map on my palm and I ran. I was so close to getting out, I could practically taste it.”

“What did it taste like?” Jeremiah said.

“Like… Like blossoming flowers on the day of San Fermin,” Carlos said.

“That sounds nice,” Jeremiah said.

“Any idea of how to escape now there’s three of us?” Graham said.

Carlos shook his head.

“I’ve tried everything,” he said. “Nothing works.”

“Do you know what Leader is planning on doing with the diggers?” Graham said.

“They’re going to use them to create sinkholes,” Carlos said.

“Sinkholes?” Jeremiah said. “What use are they down here?”

“They’re not making them down here,” Carlos said. “They’re making them up on the surface.”

“What for?” Graham said.

“They’re going to weaken the earth below our cities to sink them,” Carlos said.

“Is that even possible?” Graham said.

“Oh, it’s possible all right,” Carlos said. “When the foundation to anything becomes weak the rest has to crumble.”

“How do you know this?” Graham said.

“I’ve been here a long time,” Carlos said. “You pick up things.”

“Sh,” Graham said. “Someone’s coming.”

Footsteps hurried down the corridor. The three men stood up as the door was thrown open. Graham ran through the door, elbows raised to jab whoever was there. He disappeared into the darkness. There were several smacks, like a butcher beating at a stubborn lump of meat. Graham fell back through the door and onto the floor. Then a little man was tossed to the cell floor beside him. He was hogtied and squirming. The door slammed shut, the lock turned.

Jeremiah bent down to untie the figure. Once he was free, the little man ran at the door, beating on it with his tiny fists.

“Let me out of here!” he shouted. “Let me out! Now! I’m a Chief Digger, damn it!”

“Chief Digger 138?” Graham said.

The little man turned. His face was swollen, red and purple. He had a cut across one cheek.

“What happened to you?” Graham said.

“They beat me,” Chief Digger 138 said. “They threatened my family.”

“It’s okay,” Graham said. “It’s not your fault.”

“I told them what I told you,” Chief Digger 138 said. He addressed both Graham and Carlos. “Both of you.”

“Now they know there’s an exit tunnel?” Graham said.

“They already knew about it,” Chief Digger 138 said. “I could tell by the smiles on their faces. They already knew!”

“What do you mean they already knew?” Graham said.

“They’ve been gathering information about the surface for years,” Chief Digger 138 said. “Like our ancestors. Looking for weaknesses. Ways to

exploit you. They've been studying you for years. Maps. Everything they need to attack. They never intended for us to return to the surface."

"Carlos told us," Graham said. "They're going to use the diggers to sink our cities."

Chief Digger 138's face screwed up and he beat at the prison door again.

"They don't stand a chance," Graham said. "Not against our modern weapons."

"Are they designed to fight underground creatures?" Chief Digger 138 said.

"No," Graham said.

"Then what makes you think they'll be effective against us?" Chief Digger 138 said. "They'll think they're natural disasters, nothing more."

"We have to get out of here," Graham said. "We have to stop them."

"How?" Carlos said. "I've been in here twenty years. There's no way out."

Stray stones rattled across the floor and bumped against walls and their shoes. The room felt like it was shaking.

"What's going on?" Graham said, pressing himself against the prison door.

"It's the far wall," Chief Digger 138 said. "It's about to blow!"

"What do you mean it's about to-?" Graham said.

*Boom!* A rush of small rocks and dust descended like a curtain. The rumbling had stopped, and when it began to settle they could make out a large square-shaped shadow with a few bumps on it. A dancing ball of light grew larger as it moved toward them.

"There might not be a way out of here," Chief Digger 138 said. "But someone can make a way in."

The dust settled, revealing Chief Digger 138's wife and kids straddling a digger.

"You stole it?" Chief Digger 138 said.

"No," Chief Digger's wife said. "We just borrowed it."

They beamed with big grins.

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

AFTER THREE hundred years, today would mark the crowning achievement of all their hard work. His engineers had backward engineered the power converter with ease and assembled their own. Innovation might not be their forte, but copying and improving on an old idea? That was easy.

The guards brought out the power generators and assembled them in long lines throughout the town. They were bizarre devices, something Carlos cooked up years earlier. Someone would sit on it and pump a pair of peddles around in a circle, generating power. This power was then funneled into the diggers via cables. A pair of guards were in charge of each set of cables to ensure they unwound without kinks or blockages.

Leader stood on a castle balcony overlooking the town square. The locals were packed in, watching him.

“Brothers and sisters, today we shall take our rightful place up on the surface,” Leader said.

He paused, expecting them to cheer. None did.

“This is what we and our ancestors have been striving for our whole lives,” he said. “This is our moment to rise from the depths and continue our plans for domination!”

The people had blank expressions. *The look of the dumb masses.* They’d spent too long staring at blank dirt walls. Leader wished he could give them the vision his eyes saw, of the little man reigning supreme over the Surfacers. Didn’t they realize what he was giving them? A chance to make amends for all the wrongs that were done to their ancestors? That was the reason he was in control. He alone saw what they needed to do, and it was his will they were carrying out, for all their benefit.

“Take your place on your power generator,” Leader said. “We begin now.”

But they did not move. Were they so stupid not to realize what they were about to do? To shake the very foundations beneath the Surfacers’ feet and send them running in fear. Leader glowed at the thought of it.

Leader turned and nodded to the guards. They stepped forward, swords raised. With their boots and pointy helmets they were a fearsome sight. The town folk’s resolve broke and they headed toward the power

generators. They each climbed on, even the kids, on specially-made smaller versions.

“Begin,” Leader said.

At first it was difficult to get the pedals moving, but once they did, they got into a rhythm. The pedals turned and the power flowed through the cables to the diggers, currently sat perched at the tunnel entrances. The guards hit the power buttons and the machines began to chug, the engines turning over. First one, and then two, and then a dozen, and soon the whole town was alive with the rattle of engines. They moved forward, their drill bits spinning in place. They entered the tunnels, rising up the inclines.

They met the earth walls. Dirt and stone billowed up out of the tunnels, rising as a dirty curtain that descended over the town and peddlers. The giant drill bits carved their way into the soil with ease. A day’s worth of digging completed within a couple of minutes.

Leader raised his arms and let the dirt spray over him. It was a sign of impending victory.

Their revenge had begun.

# Chapter Thirty

“TWENTY YEARS,” Carlos said. “You couldn’t come any sooner than now?”

“We would’ve been caught,” Chief Digger 138 said. “Now, the guards are all busy.”

Carlos folded his arms, grumbling.

Graham, Jeremiah, and Chief Digger 138 and his family peered over a mound of dirt at the edge of town, at the locals on their power generators, at the loud rumbling from the tunnels, at Leader, standing on a balcony of the castle taking in the majesty of his, and his ancestors’, plans finally coming to fruition.

“You can still get out of here,” Chief Digger 138 said. “They’re not using the exit tunnel yet.”

Graham and Jeremiah exchanged a look.

“No, we’ll help you,” Jeremiah said. “It’s our fault the machines are here. We have to shut them down.”

“Carlos?” Graham said.

“Yes,” Carlos said, though he sounded hesitant. “I will stay too. Though I will not throw what remains of my wasted life away on some foolish plan.”

“How do you want to handle this?” Graham said.

“Why are you asking me?” Jeremiah said. “What do I know about putting a stop to plans for global domination?”

“You’re the engineer,” Graham said.

“So is he,” Jeremiah said.

“I don’t know,” Carlos said. “But we have to stop those diggers otherwise they’re going to get to the surface and wreak havoc.”

“We need to cut the power,” Jeremiah said.

“How do we do that?” Graham said. “Chop off their legs?”

“We cut the cables,” Jeremiah said. “No cables, no power.”

“We’ll need sharp tools to cut through those things,” Graham said.

“How about the guards’ swords?” Chief Digger 138 said. “The guards all carry them.”

“Where do they keep them?” Jeremiah said.

“In the guards’ camp,” Chief Digger 138 said. “With them all guarding the tunnels like this, there can’t be many inside.”

“Then how are we going to get close to the cables without them stabbing us in the process?” Jeremiah said.

“Maybe we should leave them to it,” Graham said. “This isn’t our problem.”

“And what about all the people up on the surface?” Jeremiah said. “The ones who will lose their lives to these terrorists? We have to do something to stop them. It’s people like you who wouldn’t lift a finger to stop the krauts and Japs during the war.”

“I’m not sure we should have,” Graham said.

“At some point you have to stand up to bullies,” Jeremiah said. “No matter who they are or where they’re from.”

“This from a man who has given up living life,” Graham said.

“I haven’t given up,” Jeremiah said. “I just didn’t know what to do with my life. But now I know. I helped build these damn diggers and I’m not going to let them misuse them like this. Technology is meant to free people, to make the world a better place. Not this.”

“Then we’ll need a distraction,” Carlos said.

“Someone needs to threaten Leader,” Jeremiah said. “He’s up in the castle all by himself. The guards are all busy. They’re protecting the diggers and tunnels.”

“I’ll go,” Graham said. “I’m the fastest. I’ll get there sooner.”

“You’re also the strongest,” Jeremiah said. “We’ll need you to hack at the cables. You’ll be more valuable down here. I’ll go. I’ll distract him and the guards.”

“You’ll need an escape plan,” Graham said. “For when the guards catch you.”

“They won’t kill me,” Jeremiah said. “I’m too valuable as an engineer.”

Jeremiah got up and ambled – ambled, because to call it running was to insult the sport – toward the castle.

“Jeremiah,” Graham said.

“Yeah?” Jeremiah said.

“You take care of yourself,” Graham said.

“It’ll be him I take care of,” Jeremiah said, nodding to the figure on the balcony. “Misusing my tech.”

He turned and hustled toward the castle.

“What should we do now?” Chief Digger 138 said.

“Now, we get ourselves armed,” Graham said.

There was a crack from one of the tunnels, like a cannon going off. Chief Digger 138 was the first to react, turning to look in its direction. The town folk slowed their peddling, a sense of wariness coming over them.

“What is it?” Graham said.

“A breach,” Chief Digger 138 said.

“What kind of breach?” Graham said.

“Water,” Chief Digger 138 said.

His tone was dead, hollow, like a child looking under the bed for the boogie monster.

A loud roaring rush surged through the tunnel. But the guards reacted fast, and turned a wheel that brought a heavy metal door across, blocking it off. A feather of water splashed over them at the last second, the rest of the torrent thumping the heavy door. It held. The guards were out of breath, eyes wide and fearful.

“Move to the next tunnel,” Leader said. “And keep peddling.”

# Chapter Thirty-One

JEREMIAH THOUGHT his heart was going to burst out of his chest. He leaned against the hard stone wall, the breath sawing out of his lungs. He stumbled back, on the very edge of a wide stone step that, if he were to fall down, would mean a broken hip and probably a lot worse.

Whose dumb idea was it for the eldest of the group to climb the Everest of steps to distract Leader? He knew it was his own, but he didn't want to admit it. He felt dizzy. Any moment he was going to collapse. He gritted his teeth. With one hand clamped tight to his chest, the other on the stone wall, he continued on up the stairs.

His feet came to a thick red carpet. He could feel the quality through the soles of his shoes. He unclenched his eyes and saw an opulent richness enjoyed only by the superrich over the peasant masses. There were items behind delicate glass cases that should have belonged in the museum for everyone to enjoy, and a modern kitchen like in a house on the surface. It made Jeremiah sick to think Leader lived like this when so many struggled to survive in the town.

Beads of sweat formed on his forehead. He approached the heinous excuse for a man before him. Leader had his hands clasped behind his back, looking down on the town below.

Jeremiah tried to approach silently. It was so tempting to shove the evil little man over the side to his death. Jeremiah was old, and they were hundreds of feet below the surface. No laws existed down here, did they? And even if they did, these people would hail him as a hero for ridding them of their evil leader. He was surprised his conscience was clear and would let him do it. He'd never been the murdering type. But then why should he be surprised? He'd been so distant from people for so long he'd lost all apparent empathy for them.

But all his rumination was negated as he wheezed up behind Leader, who turned and blinked in surprise at seeing the old man.

"Jeremiah," Leader said. "How nice to see you."

*There goes the element of surprise.*

# Chapter Thirty-Two

“WE’LL COME with you,” Chief Digger 138’s children said. “We’ll get weapons too, and fight!”

“You and your mother will go home,” Chief Digger 138 said. “You need to protect each other. Understand?”

He was looking at his sons, but he was clearly speaking to his wife. She ran her fingers through his thinning hair.

“Be careful,” she said.

“You too,” Chief Digger 138 said.

His family left.

Graham, Carlos and Chief Digger 138 ran to a squat cubed building the little man assured them was the guards’ barracks. Chief Digger 138 pushed the door open and peered inside.

“It’s empty,” he said.

Tidy triple-tiered bunkbeds lined the walls in endless rows. They entered an adjoining room and found a number of large cabinets with shiny swords inside. Graham pulled on the door, but it didn’t budge. He gripped it with both hands and tried again.

“We’ll never get the doors open,” Digger 138 said.

“It’s just a lock,” Graham said. “I’m sure we can pry it open. Or smash it. It’s glass.”

“It’s not glass,” Chief Digger 138 said. “It’s diamond.”

Graham double-took Chief Digger 138’s expression.

“You can’t be serious,” Graham said. “It’s the size of a small shed!”

“Diamonds are common down here,” Chief Digger 138 said, as if talking about tulips.

“Then how do we get it open?” Graham said.

“We can’t,” Chief Digger 138 said.

“Then what do we do for weapons?” Graham said.

“We’ll have to find something else, I guess,” Chief Digger 138 said.

“Like what?” Carlos said. “We don’t have time!”

Chief Digger 138’s eyes glazed over. Then he looked up, a smile curling his eyes.

“I’ve got an idea,” he said. “Follow me.”

# Chapter Thirty-Three

“I SEE YOU’RE putting my digger to bad use,” Jeremiah said.

“Now, now,” Leader said. “There’s no need to be like that. They’re my diggers. I’ll use them how I like.”

“I’ll be how I bloody well please,” Jeremiah said. “My machine was meant for good, to get you and your people back to the surface. Instead you’ve tainted it and turned it into something ugly. A weapon.”

“There is no good or bad,” Leader said. “Only purpose. Ships were meant to ferry products and people from place to place, they were not designed for war, and yet it was that breakthrough that led to the British dominating the world.”

“You won’t dominate anything,” Jeremiah said. “We’re going to stop you.”

“‘We’?” Leader said.

Leader turned to look down at the town, his eyes searching. And that was when he must have realized his mistake because he spun around, just in time to catch Jeremiah as he fell forward and pushed his weight against the evil little man, toward the balcony railing.

# Chapter Thirty-Four

GRAHAM, CARLOS and Chief Digger 138 held shovels with glinting edges in white-knuckled grips. The digger center was somewhat less decorative than the guards' camp. Dirt covered every surface, as if this place too was built within a tunnel.

The three men looked up at the castle's balcony.

"What's taking Jeremiah so long?" Carlos said.

"Maybe he never made it to the top," Graham said. "He probably didn't make it past the first few steps. I'll go check up on him."

Chief Digger 138 grabbed Graham's arm.

"No, wait," he said. "Look."

Leader's tall red hat spilled over the balcony railing, drifting to the ground. Two heads bobbed against one another.

"Do you think Jeremiah's up there?" Graham said.

"Could be," Chief Digger 138 said. "He's going to strangle him! He is. He's going to do it!"

His grip grew tight around Graham's arm. Out of fear? Out of excitement? Graham couldn't tell. But then Leader pushed back, and the two figures disappeared from view again.

"The guards haven't noticed them," Carlos said. "What'll we do?"

"We have to let the guards know," Chief Digger 138 said.

He took off at a run, toward the guards at the closest tunnel. They were unfurling a pair of long cables as the digging machine pushed relentlessly on.

"Guards!" Chief Digger 138 shouted. "Guards!"

He bent over, bracing his weight on his knees, doing his best impression of someone who'd been running for a long time.

"What are you doing here?" a guard said. "Get back to your power generator."

"Leader…" Chief Digger 138 said, puffing. "He's… in trouble."

The guards looked up at the balcony's lip, overhanging like a tongue from the castle's top tier. Two figures were locked together in a dance.

"We'll take care of this," a guard said. "You get back to your power generator."

"Will do," Chief Digger 138 said, turning and pretending to jog away.

The two guards took off, shouting to the guards on the tunnels to either side of them, leaving their tunnels exposed too.

“This is our chance,” Graham said.

“What happens when the guards catch Jeremiah?” Carlos said.

“Like he said, he’s too valuable to dispose of,” Graham said.

“Are you sure about that?” Carlos said.

No, but thinking otherwise only jeopardized their mission.

They ran toward one of the exposed tunnels, checking left and right for any sign of more guards. They brought their shovels down on the cables, hacking at them with the sharp edges. With two strong strokes, the cables were cut, and the rumbling of the digger at the end of the tunnel ceased.

# Chapter Thirty-Five

IT WAS A battle of wills. Leader was small, but in the prime of his life. Jeremiah was bigger, but past his prime, and so they pushed against one another, with dominance passing from one to the other.

“Give it up old man,” Leader said through gritted teeth. “You’ve got nothing left to live for!”

“No,” Jeremiah said. “I’ve got a eucalyptus tree that needs me!”

Jeremiah pressed all his weight against Leader, holding him by the arms and forcing him back inch by inch. Their muscles shivered and shook under the strain.

Jeremiah was going to throw himself at Leader. After all, what else did he have to live for? If he died, plummeting to his death, who would care? He had alienated everyone in his life, had forced himself to live in purgatory. He was the man-island everyone always quoted as being unable to exist by itself, but they were wrong. He could survive by himself, and he had. But he had no intention of dying by himself. If his life meant nothing, then at the very least his death could have meaning.

But he hesitated.

He did have something to live for. He had his son, his grandson, his daughter-in-law. He had everything to live for. He wasn’t an old man waiting to die. He was an old man with a need to change. But his life had become a meaningless routine with no stimulus to change. Change cannot occur in a vacuum. He had a reason to live, and that was why he couldn’t throw himself over the side of the building with Leader. If Leader was going to die, he needed to do it by himself.

This left Jeremiah with a problem, but it was swiftly tugged away from him as a dozen pairs of hands seized him and pulled him back. He hit the stone floor hard and felt a tooth loosen.

“Let me up!” Jeremiah screamed. “Let me up!”

“Well done, men,” Leader said, straightening his robes. “If he’s out, the others will be too. Find them and throw them in the dungeon. This time under armed guard.”

The guards pulled at Jeremiah. The old man scrabbled and clawed at the ground for purchase. His fingers snatched a handful of thick carpet fibers. They didn’t tear. Instead, the whole carpet lifted up.

A shiny boot stepped on his twisted fingers.

“You won’t get away with this!” Jeremiah said through gritted teeth. “You won’t!”

“I already have,” Leader said, applying pressure.

Jeremiah lost his grip.

# Chapter Thirty-Six

CHIEF DIGGER 138 ran ahead, playing out the same routine about Leader being in trouble. It never failed. And as he ran to each tunnel he required less and less acting to show how exhausted he was.

Meanwhile, Graham and Carlos ran along behind him, hacking at the thick bundles of cables. The shovels were blunting fast. At first they needed just a couple of swings for the cables to snap, now they needed two dozen. The digger inside the tunnel, still running on residual power, dug a few more inches before stopping. The locals continued to peddle, finding the resistance lessened, but none the wiser.

Graham wiped his sweaty forehead with the back of his arm.

"Another one down," he said.

"Only ten million more to go," Carlos said.

"Let me go, you savages!"

Jeremiah screamed bloody murder as one troop of guards pulled at him from one direction, and a second pushed from the other. Several others worked on peeling his fingers from the castle's doorframe.

"You keep going," Graham said to Carlos. "I'll go rescue the old man."

"I'm not sure he's the one needing rescuing," Carlos said.

The guards pried one hand off, and while beginning on the other, Jeremiah grabbed the doorframe with the first hand. While he was distracting them Graham might actually have a chance to mount a good offensive. He ran, yelling, and threw his body against the guards, knocking them downhill.

Graham picked one up and spun him around like an Olympic hammer and let go. He sailed through the air and landed painfully three meters away. Graham kicked and punched at the little men in uniform. He'd long since lost his reticence. The guards might not have been bad people, but they were carrying out the orders of their leader, which made them culpable. They deserved to be punished.

Graham reached down with a hand to help Jeremiah, but the old man ignored it, and pushed himself up onto his own feet. He looked at the flattened little figures.

"I loosened the top," he said.

"More than loosened it," Graham said. "I'd say you near pulverized it."

Jeremiah grunted. Graham thought he caught the hint of a slight lifting up at the corners of the old man's mouth. Then his eyes bulged.

"Run!" Jeremiah said.

A fresh wave of guards was heading right for them. Graham turned to run, his legs aching to sprint. But Jeremiah still hadn't fully recovered from his ordeal and limped forward.

"Get out of here!" Jeremiah said.

The guards roared, brandishing their swords.

"I said go!" Jeremiah said.

He pushed Graham, but it was so weak it had no effect. Anger flared up in Graham like a geyser. He would have laid the old man out if he'd been half his age. Instead, he gritted his teeth, grabbed the old man, and swung him over his shoulders into a fireman's lift.

"You're a fool!" Jeremiah shouted. "Imbecile! Moron! Idiot!"

"Maybe," Graham said. "But I'm not decrepit yet."

Jeremiah glowered at Graham, and then looked away. He might not like being manhandled but he knew he didn't have much choice.

Jeremiah was light, but after a couple of hundred yards the weight seemed to swell. Graham shifted the old man like a bag of fresh potatoes onto his back. Jeremiah wrapped his arm around Graham's neck, unmindful of whether he was strangling him or not. The locals, still peddling, pointed at the scene taking place.

"Stop them!" Leader shouted as he bounded out of the castle. "Stop them!"

The remaining guards still at their posts ran at the fugitives with swords raised. Graham met Carlos. They skidded to a halt. Within moments they were surrounded.

Leader pushed his way through the guards, a self-satisfied smirk on his face.

"Your childish attempts to stop us have failed," he said.

"Why are you doing this?" Graham said. "Why punish all those people you've never even met before?"

"Because their ancestors used us and tossed us aside," Leader said, eyes burning pits. "Do you know how that feels? To be used and then tossed aside like you were worthless?"

"Yes," Graham said in a small voice. "I do."

Leader blinked, but he quickly recovered.

“I won’t let you do it to us again,” he said. “We have the right to purpose.”

“No one wants to take that away from you,” Jeremiah said. “But you can’t destroy people because of what our ancestors did to your ancestors centuries ago. You have to let go. There are places on the surface that are making the same mistake as you. They focus on the past, to get vengeance. They never develop, instead relying on the forward-thinking of other nations.”

Graham peered around at the guards and locals close enough to hear. Jeremiah was playing a trick. He was looking at Leader, but speaking to them.

“We’ll create giant sinkholes under the cities of the world, and take them for ourselves!” Leader said, madness flashing in his eyes.

“The world is too big,” Jeremiah said. “You’ll never sink all our cities.”

“We just want what was promised to us!” Leader said. “We want our promise fulfilled!”

“Sometimes people don’t keep their promises,” Jeremiah said. “Sometimes you have to go out and get what you want.”

“That’s exactly what I intend to do,” Leader said.

“With peace,” Graham said. “Not war.”

“Easy to say when you’re the ant before the boot,” Leader said. He turned to the guards. “Seize them.”

“Hey!” a voice shouted. “Pick on someone your own size!”

It was Chief Digger 138. And he wasn’t alone. A whole retinue of town folk stood beside him. The other town folk, still on their power generators, slowed, and then stopped.

“Get back on your generators!” Leader shouted. “Get back on them now! Guards! Guards!”

The town folk didn’t flinch. Chief Digger 138 stepped forward and stood with Graham, Jeremiah and Carlos.

“We’ve been led by bad blood for too long,” he said. “It’s time we lead ourselves.”

“Attack them!” Leader screamed. “Hack them to pieces!”

“You’re our sons, our daughters, our wives and husbands,” Chief Digger 138 said, addressing the guards. “We shouldn’t be afraid of you. You should be our protection from Leader. Be on our side now. Defend us.”

The guards wavered.

“Useless!” Leader said. “The lot of you! If you won’t restore the honor of our ancestors, I will.”

He jumped on a power generator and peddled, cycling with every fiber of his being. The digger he was powering thrummed and carved its way through the soil. There was a loud crack from the end of the tunnel, and an echoing rush that made the little people’s eyes widen to the size of saucers.

“Stop him!” Carlos said. “Stop Leader now!”

A second crack followed, louder than the first, and a heavy rush spilled down the tunnel. It burst into town, knocking the first few rows of shacks flat.

Leader looked up at the last moment, and was caught full in the face as it smashed into him, knocking him aside and out of view.

The town folk screamed and ran for the castle, the highest point in the domed space. The water rushed through the town’s streets, submerging the low buildings. The water roared as it spewed out. It took only a matter of minutes before the town was flooded. The last of the deluge dribbled out the end of the tunnel.

“You tried to destroy us, and ended up destroying yourself,” Carlos said. “There’s a parable there somewhere, I think.”

“I’ll make sure to enjoy it when I’m sipping on a mojito on a Caribbean beach,” Graham said.

“This is your fault,” Leader said.

He was drenched head to foot and crawling out of the water onto the muddy embankment. Two guards bent down to help him up, but he waved them off.

“Don’t touch me!” he said. He turned on Graham, Jeremiah and Carlos.

“This is your doing,” Leader said. “You were sent here to destroy us. Yes, I see it now. You only pretended to help us! You knew this was going to happen the whole time!”

He launched at Jeremiah with his long nails drawn. But Chief Digger 138 was faster and seized Leader by the arms.

“Take him to the dungeon,” Chief Digger 138 said.

And just like that, Leader’s power was transferred to Chief Digger 138. It could have been anyone who’d said it, and they would have become the new leader in the others’ eyes, but it had been Chief Digger 138.

“You can’t do this!” Leader said, kicking and screaming. “I’m the leader! It’s my born right! Let me go!”

“Now what?” Jeremiah said.

“Now we go home,” Graham said.

“What about these poor people with no homes?” Jeremiah said.

“We’ll be all right,” Chief Digger 138 said. “Now we’ve got a castle to live in.”

“Where does the exit come out?” Carlos said.

“Who cares?” Jeremiah said. “Let’s just get out of here.”

“I’ll lead you,” Chief Digger 138 said.

Graham turned to address the locals.

“I’d like to thank you all for a wonderful stay but… you know,” he said.

They pulled a wedge of driftwood from the ruins and floated across to the exit tunnel, the mud sucking at their heels. They followed the darkness of the tunnel up and up and up.

*Where would they emerge?* Graham wondered. He didn’t care if they emerged in Pyongyang. He’d be glad to be out of that hellhole with a god-like ruler and military state.

Graham frowned, cocking his head to one side. Maybe they’d been in North Korea the whole time.

# Chapter Thirty-Seven

BENEATH THE corner of a large rock was a hole. A passer-by could have easily mistaken it for a rabbit hole. Its edges began to crumble and fall away. It grew wider. Several pairs of hands dug at the edge from the inside, widening it further. Then a pair of eyes looked out.

The sun was low, burning a deep glowing red like iron left in a furnace. It hovered just above the horizon. It was the most beautiful thing Graham had ever seen. There was a chill in the air. He climbed out, before helping the others.

There was a gasp behind Graham.

"So that's what stars look like," Chief Digger 138 said. "You're right. Not very beautiful at all."

He beamed, clearly loving the view. A shooting star skimmed across the sky, swiftly followed by a second and a third.

"I should be getting back," Chief Digger 138 said.

"Aren't you coming?" Graham said.

"We have to rebuild," Chief Digger 138 said. "It's the only home we've got."

"You're not going up onto the surface?" Jeremiah said.

"We will," Chief Digger 138 said. "But not right now. Better to be somewhere you know than somewhere you don't. Plus, I've got a family to be getting back to."

"And a people to lead," Jeremiah said.

"If they want me," Chief Digger 138 said.

"You'd get my vote," Jeremiah said.

High praise indeed from a man such as Jeremiah.

"It'll be strange carrying out new duties," Chief Digger 138 said. "It only took three hundred years to get my first promotion."

"What'll you do now?" Graham said.

"I don't know," Chief Digger 138 said. "We'll just have to find our way somehow."

"Don't be a stranger," Graham said.

"I'll come dig up your garden sometime," Chief Digger 138 said.

And he left.

"Now what?" Graham said.

“Now we head home,” Carlos said.

“We’re in the Outback,” Jeremiah said.

“Are you sure?” Carlos said. “We could be anywhere on Earth.”

“I’d recognize old man saltbushes anywhere,” Jeremiah said.

“Which direction shall we head in?” Carlos said.

They peered around at their bleak surroundings. It looked the same from every direction.

“Anyone want to choose?” Jeremiah said.

“We’re seriously just heading out into a desert in a random direction?” Carlos said.

“We’ll find something eventually,” Jeremiah said. “Even if it’s nothing.”

“We’ve got a long way to go yet before we get out of this desert,” Carlos said.

“It’ll give us time to get to know each other,” Graham said.

“Depress me even more, why don’t you?” Jeremiah said. “I already know more about you than I’d ever want to.”

“You old flirt,” Graham said.

“All’s well that ends well,” Carlos said.

“We don’t yet know the effects on the surface,” Jeremiah said. “For all we know Leader’s plans might have worked and a city somewhere has sunk.”

“Fingers crossed it’s Darwin,” Graham said.

He reached into his jacket and took out Jeremiah’s deeds.

“Here,” he said. “Keep them. I couldn’t give them to my boss anyway. He’s a son of a bitch.”

“But you’re not, suddenly?” Jeremiah said.

“I am,” Graham said. “But not that much of one. You should keep your house.”

“I don’t know,” Jeremiah said. “I’ve been thinking about going into a home lately. It might be nice, socializing, meeting new people. Activities. I’ve been on my own too long.”

Graham looked into the middle distance.

“Maybe there’s a way you can have both,” he said. “Keep your home, as well as socialize.”

“You’ve got that dangerous look in your eye,” Jeremiah said. “You’ve got an idea?”

“I do,” Graham said. “And it’s a doozy. Do you remember when we were in prison and I said I had a way for you to keep your house? It’s pretty simple. You set up a business that will be of benefit to the people who will end up living in the new homes around you.”

“What kind of business?” Jeremiah said.

“Anything,” Graham said. “It could be a playground for the kids, a wildlife reserve, a park. Anything that the locals will enjoy.”

“Won’t your building plans already have those things?” Jeremiah said.

“They do,” Graham said, nodding. “But if we found a lenient judge we might be able to convince her you’re offering a better service than the property company can provide.”

“I don’t have the kind of money I’d need to set up a business like that,” Jeremiah said.

“Don’t worry,” Graham said. “I’ve already thought of what it’ll be. And it’s fully self-funding. But you’ll need a decent project manager…”

“The job’s yours if you can provide everything you say you can,” Jeremiah said.

Graham ran back to the tunnel, got to his knees, and shouted into it.

“Chief Digger 138!” Graham said. “Wait!”

Silence answered him.

“Chief Digger 138?” Graham shouted again.

“Yeah?” Chief Digger 138 shouted back.

“Don’t go anywhere!” Graham said. “I’ve got an answer to all your problems!”

“I’ve heard that before,” Jeremiah said. “And it never fails to disappoint.”

# Chapter Thirty-Eight

“It’s been a week since the quake and few feel safe in their homes. The earthquake has, quite literally, shaken the Adelaide population to the core. There were no deaths, but plenty of speculation as to what caused this natural phenomenon in an area not renowned for seismic activity.

“The quake has sparked growing interest nationwide in geology and seismology. Here in Alice Springs a new tourist resort has opened up that hopes to capitalize on this newfound interest. Tourists enter the huge tent to discover the world right beneath their feet, educated by a tribe who call themselves the Manu. Exciting? Yes. Eccentric? Certainly. This reporter has already booked her ticket and looking forward to the voyage of discovery. This is Pamela Abbey for ABC News.”

Graham switched off the news app and tucked his earphones in his pocket. The elevator dinged and the doors opened. He passed the lucid ‘Righteous Brothers’ sign and proceeded down the narrow corridor to the large office at the end. The secretary rose to greet him, but she was cut short by Graham’s raised hand. He pushed the door open and entered.

Mr. Pearson looked up from his desk. It was cluttered with paper. He looked like a frog collecting pebbles to impress a new mate.

“Graham!” he said. “I wondered where you’d got to! I thought you’d slipped off the face of the Earth! I gave your desk to Dwayne. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Why should I?” Graham said.

“Did you get the deeds?” Mr. Pearson said.

“Yes,” Graham said.

Mr. Pearson blinked in surprise.

“You did?” he said. His expression brightened into a grin. “Of course you did! I knew you could do it! You just needed the right motivation, that’s all.”

“I returned them to Mr. Witness,” Graham said.

Mr. Pearson’s unibrow frowned.

“Come again?” he said.

“I had the deeds, and then handed them back,” Graham said.

“Then you’re out of a job,” Mr. Pearson said. “Get out.”

He bent back over his documents. He looked up when he realized Graham hadn't moved.

"What?" he said.

"It's a felony to coerce someone into carrying out illegal activities," Graham said.

"And who's going to believe you?" Mr. Pearson said.

"Dwayne does," Graham said. "He's actually a very nice guy when you get to know him. He was in the car when you gave the order, if you'll recall."

"He doesn't have the balls to do something like that," Mr. Pearson said.

"He wouldn't, normally," Graham said. "Except that he is very ambitious. I'd say he would do just about anything to get ahead in his career. Even sabotaging others'. As you say, he's got the nose for it. That's how you got to your position, isn't it? By betraying others?"

Mr. Pearson pressed a button on his phone.

"Come into my office," he said.

A moment later, Dwayne entered.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" he said.

"Is what Graham tells me true?" Mr. Pearson said.

"About the coercion?" Dwayne said. "Yes, sir."

"Get out," Mr. Pearson said.

"Yes, sir," Dwayne said.

"It would be your word against mine," Mr. Pearson said.

"I'm sure we can find more people to testify against you," Graham said. "I hope they give us the big court room. We'll need it."

"What you're doing is entrapment," Mr. Pearson said.

"Maybe," Graham said. "But right now it's just you and me and no ambitious witnesses."

Mr. Pearson sighed.

"I wish you'd grown a spine sooner," he said. "I could have used you then."

"Unfortunately, I don't much like being used," Graham said.

"What do you want?" Mr. Pearson said.

# Chapter Thirty-Nine

JEREMIAH TOOK a sip. He grimaced. He'd added too much coffee again. He added a little more milk. He needed smaller teaspoons. He turned to the coat stand by the door. His shoulders were bunched up. He relaxed them. He didn't need to walk like that anymore. His home was clear, free of the newspapers and other detritus. The sinkhole had taken care of that. His cleaner took care of the rest.

The little men were terrific builders. They moved like a single unit, passing materials to one another, often without looking at what they were even passing, or who to, like it was choreographed. They rebuilt Jeremiah's floor within a few hours, and then offered to do the whole house. But Jeremiah kindly refused. Every hole and scratch and mark was a prod to a memory. At his age he needed as many prods as he could get.

He put on his ragged coat and stepped outside. He was instantly assaulted by the murmurings and excited squeals of families queuing up. They were standing outside a huge tent that covered almost the entirety of Jeremiah's land.

"Please follow us inside, ladies and gentlemen," a little man said, shepherding the people into the tent. "And prepare to be amazed!"

"Will we really go down, Dad?" a little girl said. "Will we really go deep down?"

"Of course we will," her father said with a smile that showed he didn't really believe that.

The families filed into the tent, revealing a pair of figures watching from the other side of the field.

"How are we doing?" Jeremiah said.

"Booked up for the next two months," Graham said.

"People seem to really enjoy it," Chief Digger 138 said.

"What happens if interest dries up?" Jeremiah said.

"Oh, I'm sure we can rustle up a little two-pointer when the need suffices," Chief Digger 138 said with a grin.

"You haven't gone down to see the show yet?" Graham said.

"No," Jeremiah said. "Not after we got stuck down there. Maybe later."

"It's a history of the little people, where they came from, how they lived underground," Graham said.

“I read the pamphlet,” Jeremiah said.

“Just let me know if you change your mind,” Chief Digger 138 said. “I’ll get you some VIP tickets. Well, I’d better get this show on the road. He approached the tent. “You’re about to enter a world of surprise and intrigue, ladies and gentlemen. If you’ll take a seat we’ll begin descending deep into the Earth. But first let me tell you a little about our past. You see, we weren’t always nice people. Once upon a time we were led by an evil leader called, appropriately enough, Leader…”

The tent door closed, blocking Chief Digger 138’s voice.

“You’re off to the tree again?” Graham said to Jeremiah.

“I am,” Jeremiah said.

The two men rounded the huge tent to the back of the property, to a small space the tent did not reach. They took a seat on a protruding eucalyptus tree limb.

“Did you call your son?” Graham said.

“I did,” Jeremiah said. “He was surprised to hear from me.”

“I’ll bet,” Graham said. “How’d it go?”

“I explained to him why I did what I did, how it was his mother’s wish,” Jeremiah said. “He says he’s going to come visit. He’ll bring his wife and son.”

“Excited?” Graham said.

“Terrified,” Jeremiah said. “What if he doesn’t like me?”

“He’s guaranteed not to like you,” Graham said. “Just act cool.”

“I might recruit some little men kids to distract them,” Jeremiah said.

“That’ll work,” Graham said.

Jeremiah smiled. It was warm, not the cold frightful thing he usually gave to annoy someone, or to show how spiteful he was being, but the kind Graham remembered seeing on mornings when he would cook them a hot breakfast of sausages and eggs.

“Thank you,” Jeremiah said.

Graham’s cheeks flushed. He felt mildly embarrassed.

“You’re welcome,” he said.

They looked out at the sprawling red bleakness of the Australian Outback. It was starkly beautiful.

“Sinkholes have occurred through the entire history of the Earth,” Jeremiah said. “If one sinkhole buried this small tribe, then how many other nations and peoples and creatures could there be beneath our feet?”

“The thought makes my head hurt,” Graham said.

“Thinking again?” Jeremiah said. “I warned you not to do that.”

“With you throwing around philosophical questions like that, how can I not?” Graham said.

“God help whoever does have to go on those adventures,” Jeremiah said. “I want no part of it.”

“Who said you had any choice?” Graham said. “A sinkhole could happen anywhere and at any time.”

Just then, the ground began to shake. The two men pulled their feet up and clung to the branch they sat on. Ridiculous, because a sinkhole could just as easily swallow a tree as a man.

“Not again!” Graham said.

The ground opened up like hungry jaws. A small hole that grew wider and wider. And then it stopped. But Graham and Jeremiah knew better than to believe it was really over. Their eyes remained transfixed on it.

Three small helmets popped up. They turned around and looked up at Graham and Jeremiah. They had shovels clasped tight in their tiny hands. They grinned, exposing the large front teeth they’d inherited from their father Chief Digger 138. They chuckled. Graham and Jeremiah did not.

# The Lost World

# Prologue

GEORGE TATE felt the bitter cold the moment he stepped out of the shelter. Jack Frost gnawed on his nose like a feral dog, and his fingers felt like thick unthawed sausages. He reached into his pockets to take out his gloves, only to discover he was already wearing them. He also wore a pair of Inuit boots, inlaid with caribou fur, a coat designed to withstand temperatures of up to (or rather down to) fifty degrees, and a hat of reindeer fur. George was still frozen, and he couldn't have been happier.

The sky was clear and the stars shone like diamonds on velvet. The aurora danced overhead, a rainbow caught in a playful wind, mixing green, yellow, and flecks of red, strumming his favorite tune on the ozone.

There were still so many mysteries about our planet we hadn't yet solved, and although Jules Verne's stories could rarely be described as realistic, George was convinced Verne was right in one respect: there were exciting unseen worlds beneath his very feet.

George carried a rifle in the crook of one arm in case of polar bears, and cast his experienced eye over the snow. Delicate veils of ice swept across the land's surface. It was a desolate landscape, and yet life thrived here. Just the other day he'd seen a beautiful snow fox leaping and throwing its fragile weight against the frozen land in an effort to puncture a hole in the ice and get at the morsel of food it could hear below the surface.

George pressed his lips together and whistled a muffled tune, his lips numb and largely unresponsive. He lifted his legs over the snowdrift that reached up to his knees, and walked, using very difficult steps, over to a container. His boots made satisfying crunching noises on the white powder snowdrifts.

George loved his job. He was at one of the most isolated spots on earth, in Alaska at 71 degrees north, 156 degrees west. It was daylight twenty-three hours a day. The closest other person would be three hundred miles away, at another outpost like his own, and then another two hundred miles to the nearest settlement.

George input the passcode and the container door slid open. He ran an eye over the seismograph. There were slight fluctuations, but nothing to worry about. Arranged along the walls were all kinds of complex equipment. He bent down and picked up a set of thermostat rods. These were long needle-like devices with a touchscreen display on top.

A relatively new technology called 'fracking' had become popular amongst the world's nations. Fracking meant digging for valuable natural gas beneath the Earth's surface with the use of high-pressure water hoses. Controversy over the technique had stimulated protests across Europe and the US as it was believed to cause disturbances in the soil, namely earthquakes and sinkholes. Tests were run ad nauseam on a potential new fracking site until all were sure there would be no such event, but the people still protested.

As a seismologist, part of George's job was to keep an eye on the seismographs at the fracking facilities he oversaw. So far he had found no evidence fracking caused earthquakes or any other seismic event. He had run tests all over the US, and was now running one here in Alaska.

George got sent to these locations at his own request. It was what made him know he was still alive. Without it life was pretty dull. He loved his son Aaron with every fiber of his being, but no matter how he looked at it, Aaron was still a kid who couldn't share in his adventures.

George reached into a pocket on his Gore-Tex coat and felt at the woolly hat Aaron had given him, and let the warm memories wash over him.

It was hard to believe that it was only yesterday he was in the heart of civilization, his things packed and ready to go, when he had kissed his seven-year-old son on the head and told him he

would be back in a couple of months. Each time he went, Aaron said, “Can I come with you?”

Aaron was going to be an adventurer himself one day. George was certain of it. George very much looked forward to one of those days answering, “Yes.” But it wasn’t yet, not for another few years.

“I got you a present,” George said. “I’m sorry I won’t be here for your birthday. So, I wanted to give it to you now.”

Aaron tore through the paper like it was Christmas. He picked up the globe inside it. It was made of glass, in the shape of the Earth, showing all its mountains and valleys and oceans.

“Can you see this bit near the top?” George said. “I’m going to go there to do some experiments. Any time you get lonely, all you have to do is shake this globe and you’ll see me.”

Aaron shook it now, and a rush of small white flecks rose to the top of the globe and rained down on a scene from a fairy tale, complete with fracking machine, shelter, and little man.

“Is it cold there?” Aaron said.

“It can be,” George said.

“How cold?” Aaron said.

“You know the freezer in the fridge?” George said. “About the same as that.”

“Will you freeze?” Aaron said.

“Not if I can help it,” George said with a smile.

Aaron pushed back the blankets and hopped down out of bed. He went to a chest of drawers and rooted amongst the contents. After a moment he came out with the hand-knitted woolly hat he’d made in craft class at school. He handed it to his father. It had reindeers and Santa Clauses on it.

“To keep you warm,” Aaron said.

George put it on. It barely fit on his head – like a novelty party hat.

“At least the top of my head will be warm,” he said.

Aaron giggled and wrapped his arms around his father. George did the same. They were a cocoon around each other, warm and loving, and just like all the other times before he left for another adventure, George hesitated about whether or not to go. He missed large chunks of his son’s life whenever he went away. He missed birthdays, Christmases, often whole summer holidays. But it was a job that he loved and he knew Aaron would be safe and warm here in California. He lifted Aaron up with his muscular arms and set him carefully down on the bed and tucked him in again.

“I’m going to graduate from second grade in a couple of months,” Aaron said.

“I’ll be back by then,” George said.

“You promise?” Aaron said.

“I promise,” George said. “I’ll bring you something back from Alaska, how about that?”

Not for the first time he wondered why he didn’t just get a desk job like most people. *Because you can’t*, a voice inside told him. *You need the thrill.*

George carried the thermostat rods over to the fracking unit and switched one on. The tip glowed bright red and then white as it heated up to two hundred degrees. He sat it on the surface and held it steady as it sank into the snow and then lower, into the harder band of ice, until it had lost half its height. A green light flicked on. It was set.

George moved around the fracking machine at a ninety-degree angle, switched the next thermostat on and installed it. He did the same with the final two thermostat devices so they formed a square around the fracking machine, which made a hissing sound as it blasted away the rock and earth. The *Hiss-Thump-Thump-Thump* was strangely hypnotic.

George turned and headed back toward his shelter and considered how he was going to spend the rest of his day. Perhaps he would ride his snow mobile to the gorge and look around. But first he would make himself a cup of Joe and enjoy what remained of his morning.

George breathed in a deep lungful of the cleanest air on Earth and let himself feel the warmth of the mist before his face before the cold stole it. He looked back at the shelter. It was a drop box container, usually used in the military. It was designed for efficiency and conservation. No heat was wasted. It used snow and ice to heat the inside as well as filter water. Fuzzy yellow light fell across the snow from its tiny windows. A snow mobile sat beside the shelter, wearing its own overalls to keep it from freezing.

George's foot sank up to the knee in the snow. He pressed his other foot on the snow and pulled his trapped foot out of the snowdrift. He took another step toward the shelter when the same foot sank again.

"What the blazes?" he said aloud.

He replicated the same procedure as before to extricate himself, but this time both his feet sank into the snowdrift. He turned to look back at the fracking machine. A small indentation of snow, like a worm creeping just under the surface, had fallen away. It curled around him in a spiral.

*Bleep, bleep!*

In the path of the sinking snow, one of the thermostat rods leaned over at an angle. The green light turned red and bleeped like a sheep needing rescue after getting trapped on the edge of a cliff. *Bleep, bleep!*

George frowned, turned, and waded back toward it. Maybe he'd placed it on top of a layered snowdrift. It sometimes happened.

George approached the thermostat and picked it up, drawing it out of the snow. He moved it to another spot and the tip, still glowing red hot, touched the snow's surface and sank through it like a hot knife through butter, before it met something solid. Once it was at the right depth, the light blinked green again.

*Bleep, bleep!*

Now another rod was sinking into the snow.

*What the hell's going on?* The ground was geographically solid – that was why they'd chosen it as a fracking site in the first place.

Flakes of snow dislodged and ran down each of the small snowdrift-like mounds. The ground quivered and shook. George's heart stopped and his blood froze in his veins – an effect independent of the weather – as the indented spiral spread outwards, fast. It reached like a tendril for the shelter he'd been living in, and then paused. The wind whistled across the vast icy emptiness.

George found his voice and said breathlessly, "Sinkhole."

The snow and earth shifted inwards, toward the center of the camp, like water swirling down a plughole. The fracking machine groaned and screamed, the metal breaking and snapping, and fell over at an angle, the gas from the Earth hissing, and then dying as it was stifled by earth and snow. The fracking machine sank halfway into the hole, and then inched slower and slower into it.

The thermostat rods fell over and swirled around in the ice until they couldn't be seen, and disappeared through the center of the sinkhole. A great silent eruption tore through the space, and if it hadn't been for the rods clinking together, and the snow mobiles rattling as they slid down into the sinkhole, it would have been silent. Even the two containers began to drift into the hole.

George pulled his legs from the shifting snow and pumped his muscles up the incline. The harder he tried, the faster the sinkhole seemed to pull on him. There was no purchase, nothing he could push himself off of. But he was strong. He lay down on his stomach and pulled himself through the snow, like he was swimming. It was bitter cold and the ice washed against him, down his neck and against his skin, but he worked hard, fighting the imposed tide. If he could hold on, if he could keep fighting, he would be able to outlast the sinkhole and emerge out of it.

Alarm bells rang in his mind as the snow mobile continued its slow orbit around the outer edge of the sinkhole and headed right for him. The snow mobile caught him, and he lost his rhythm.

George threw out a hand and caught the snow mobile's engine. He pulled himself up, scaling the engine and soft cushion. The snow mobile fell further into the sinkhole and began to twist to one side. He always left the keys in the ignition – there was little chance anyone would be around to steal it. He turned the ignition over, and the engine coughed and spluttered, kicking up smoke. He tried again with the same result.

"Come on!" George said.

He turned the key again and this time the engine roared, and struggled against the relentless suck of the sinkhole. The snow mobile's backend lifted from the muddy sludge and began to pull itself up out of the drift.

The shelter floated toward the sinkhole, heading directly toward it, too cumbersome and heavy to make swirling movements. George pulled on the snow mobile's throttle, but he was fighting against the tide of snow. The snow mobile's engine could barely keep turning over. George turned the handlebars toward the shelter. He drove right into the door, knocking it open.

There were muffles from inside, someone fast asleep, or at the edge of waking. The sinkhole was silent, one reason that made it so deadly.

"Wake up!" George shouted. "Wake up! There's a sinkhole! We're going to-!"

And that's when the snow and ice collapsed, the sinkhole giving up all pretensions of a slow drawn-out death and sucked the contents of the crater into itself.

George screamed, and there came another scream, high-pitched and piercing, from the shack. George fell back into the snow, his mouth clogged with ice. His eyes felt frozen. He took a deep breath as the sinkhole seized him and dragged him under.

The last thought that passed through George's mind before he fell toward oblivion was of Aaron, his graduation, and his broken promise, and a deep regret, colder, harsher, and more painful than the ice that consumed him. The shelter and snow mobile followed him into the abyss.

As if it were a monster and it had had its fill, the sinkhole ceased, and the remaining snow dribbled down into the crater and lay there, untouched and perfect. The wind howled over the landscape, silent and still. Nothing remained of the camp. It, and the existence of anything that had been there, had been wiped clean, as if it had never existed at all.

# 1

“MISS TATE,” Rosetta said with a warm smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you again.”

Zoe Tate shook Rosetta’s hand. Zoe had five inches on Rosetta, but she quailed under the shorter woman’s stern expression, reminding her of a dislikeable French teacher from school.

“Nice to see you again too,” Zoe said.

Zoe’s assistant, Gavin, shook Rosetta’s hand too, letting himself hold it for a little too long.

“What lovely skin you’ve got,” he said.

“You think so?” Rosetta said, raising her hand and making each finger move independently. “It’s made of synthetic stem cells, grown in the lab and then grafted onto my robotic arm. It’s a great improvement on the plastic sheeting I had before.”

“You look great to me,” Gavin said, leaving no room for confusion of his meaning.

Rosetta took no notice of him. She turned to Zoe.

“Are you ready for the presentation?” she said. “I know Bryan and the executives are very much looking forward to it.”

*Oh great*, Zoe thought. *Expectations.* Zoe silenced the butterflies in her stomach with the wave of an imaginary hand.

“Sure,” she said. “Lead the way.”

“Here are your passkeys,” Rosetta said, handing over a pair of cards on ribbon thongs. “I’ll take you to the meeting room now.”

Rosetta led them through the plush lobby of the Angelo Building. People in business suits came and went, getting their passkeys at security and moving through into the main building.

Rosetta’s robotic arm was a marvel. Looking at it, you couldn’t tell it wasn’t natural. Zoe had often wondered how Rosetta had lost her arm but was too polite to ask. But there was a problem with the way Rosetta moved. The arm hung from her shoulder like a piece of spaghetti clinging to a fork. Most people fidgeted, disclosing their innermost thoughts and feelings with their hands, but Rosetta’s did not. Not that Gavin would ever notice. He couldn’t take his eyes off Rosetta’s shapely rump as the fabric of her dress pulled tight around it.

They paused a moment at the elevators and waited in awkward silence. Zoe mumbled under her breath, going over the presentation one last time.

Gavin leaned in close.

“Relax,” he said. “It’s only the biggest, most important presentation of your life. What’s to worry about?”

“Thanks,” Zoe said. “I’d almost forgotten about it. What would I do without you to remind me of these things?”

Zoe closed her eyes and tried to pick up her presentation where she had left off, only she couldn’t remember. She glared at Gavin, who was too busy admiring Rosetta’s profile to notice. It was the most important meeting in Environment Solutions’ recent history. She had met with Bryan Angelo nine months earlier to provide analyzes of various worksites across the state. Angelo Industries wanted to build a drilling site using modern equipment. Fracking was a relatively new process of drilling. The system was often cited in the newspapers for causing earthquakes, sinkholes and landslides. It was Zoe’s job to ascertain whether these were genuine concerns on the sites Angelo Industries was interested in using. Zoe was chosen because she had made a name for herself as among the first to allay public concerns over genetically modified food. Although it would take time for the truth to trickle down to the public, opinions were already beginning to change.

Her argument to the FDA went like this: “We’ve been modifying plants and animals for our own benefit for thousands of years. The only difference is now we’re better able to harness

technology and do it in a more effective, safe, and cost-effective way."

Zoe had gained a reputation as honest, vocal and hardworking. Now society had a problem with fracking. It was a relatively new industry, with plenty of room for growth, at least that was what Bryan Angelo was counting on.

The elevator hummed as they ascended at an unconscionable speed, their ears popping like they were in a rising airplane. At each floor they stopped at they saw the title of a new division of Angelo Industries: *Advanced Robotics, Aerospace, Electronics,* etc.

They got off at *Resource Management.* This was the division Angelo had started his company with almost twenty-five years earlier, the division that was closest to his heart and still provided him with the most profit. How Bryan began his company was the stuff of legend in business circles.

The story went that a local farmer discovered a large oil well under his land, but refused to let anyone drill and destroy the view out of his bedroom window. Many companies had come to him, requesting permission to drill in his back yard, often making outrageous offers, but the farmer had flat-out refused. He did not need the money, he said, and preferred to keep the beautiful view out of his bedroom untainted with pumps. The oil companies moved on, concluding the old man had a screw loose. More than one company made a note in its files to pursue the farmer's children once the old man was out of the picture.

But Bryan Angelo had another approach. At the age of eighteen, Angelo went to see the farmer with a plan of how to build a pump without spoiling the view. The farmer carefully looked over the young man's designs and asked him if it would really work.

"There's only one way to find out," Bryan had said. "But I give you my word the structure will never breach the height of the sycamore trees on your land."

The farmer took to Bryan immediately. He'd worked in the farmer's fields before, during the summer months, picking fruit and vegetables to pay for his college education. As a rule, the farmer did not work with those he did not know, a benefit Bryan exploited to his benefit. Bryan began building the very next day, with a skeleton crew handpicked from his group of friends.

There were some issues. The reason pumps are so tall and ungainly is because they require the movement to generate enough pressure to pull the oil up from deep within the earth. But Bryan had come up with a complicated combination of wheels and pulleys that had the same effect, but required less vertical space to do it. It looked like something from a Rube Goldberg drawing. Bryan patented the design, and it was one that conservationists later pressed for other companies to adopt. It was less of an eyesore on the natural landscape, in its own way quite beautiful. If companies insisted on pumping for oil, then it was better done in a way that didn't offend anyone.

The pump built, the farmer continued to drink his coffee in the mornings, view unspoiled.

Bryan Angelo used his profits to invest in various energy company stocks. Over the course of fifteen years he developed a lucrative portfolio. But he tired of trading stocks, feeling like he was just pushing paper from one place to another. He sold his stocks and shares just before the economic crash of 2008 and used it to invest in his company.

He found new entrepreneurial talent, letting them have free reign over their various areas of expertise, stepping in only when the partner wanted to do something too expensive or risky. Bryan had a way with people, encouraging them to take less risky decisions, to shelf their revolutionary ideas until they were more feasible and thus more likely to be a success. Now, Bryan was entering the fracking market. It was familiar, but yet new, territory, and he needed the aid of a research company to look into the potential dangers involved with such a project.

A seismologist by trade, Zoe had all the experience of working with earthquakes and other natural phenomena associated with fracking, as well as other intrusive digging techniques. She cared very much about nature but understood the ever-hungry need for businesses and consumers to meet goals.

Rosetta pulled the heavy door open with ease using her robot arm. She had to lean back quite far and position her feet just so, but the door opened with little pressure. The floor was quiet and Zoe could hear the whirring of the hydraulics in Rosetta's arm.

"The port for the projector is just under the table here," Rosetta said. "Light controls are beside the door. If you need anything, just ask."

She handed her card to Zoe, but Gavin intercepted it.

"Is your personal number on here?" Gavin said.

"No," Rosetta said. She turned to Zoe. "Good luck."

She turned and left through the heavy doors.

"I swear, I could watch her walk all day," Gavin said.

"Give me a hand with setting up my laptop," Zoe said. "Pervert."

"If it's a perverted thing to admire a beautiful woman, then I guess I'm a pervert," Gavin said.

"Congratulations," Zoe said. "The first step to recovery is accepting you have a problem."

"Anyone who doesn't appreciate beauty has a problem," Gavin said.

"Admiring is one thing," Zoe said. "Ogling quite another."

Gavin shrugged.

"I don't see Rosetta complaining," he said.

"That's because she doesn't know you're doing it," Zoe said.

"I like to think she does," Gavin said. "Bryan Angelo is well-known as a hard ass. Are you sure you can handle this presentation?"

"I've had meetings with him before," Zoe said. "He always seemed fair."

Zoe was underwhelmed when she first met Bryan Angelo. Despite his wealth and power and the prestige of his personal story, there was an everydayness to him that took Zoe by surprise. He wore a suit off the peg, choosing not to splurge on the Hugo Boss variety. This from a man worth two hundred million dollars. *Probably an old miser*, Zoe had thought. People got rich for a reason, and it was often because they refused to spend anything. But she was surprised again by how young he was. He was in his early forties, in good shape, with piercing blue eyes and wavy blond hair.

He had seemed slightly stiff during their first meeting, and laid out all his ideas for what he wanted from the report. Zoe asked probing questions, and he'd replied with thorough answers, clearly not a man to leave anything to chance. He had done his homework. It wasn't until the following few meetings that he began to develop a personality in Zoe's eyes. He was caring and thoughtful, knowledgeable about art and literature. He was a country boy from Ohio, and a part of him would always belong there.

"Angelo the Fallen Angel, they call him," Gavin said. "Nicknames exist for a reason. I'll be glad to see the back of this deal."

"Environment Solutions won't," Zoe said. "We need this."

Zoe looked down at the long broad walnut-colored table in front of her. The butterflies in her stomach began to flutter again.

"I hate giving these things," Zoe said.

"Do you want me to do it?" Gavin said.

"No," Zoe said. "I got us into this mess, I might as well get us out of it."

"By that, you don't mean losing the deal, do you?" Gavin said.

There was the loud raucous boom of male voices, and the door at the opposite end of the meeting room opened. Half a dozen executives, each with matching grey pinstripe suits and black suitcases, filed into the room, talking amongst themselves as they took their seats.

Bryan Angelo, as the CEO of Angelo Industries, took his seat at the head of the table. He did not enter into the conversations going on around him unless spoken to directly.

The sight of all the executives made Zoe clutch her notes close to her chest. She took a deep breath and cleared her throat. The executives continued talking and took no notice of her.

“Okay, let’s begin,” she said, clapping her hands.

They still took no notice of her. Except Bryan. He raised his hand to rap on the table with his knuckles to get the executives’ attention, but before he could knock, Zoe said in a booming voice: “Break time’s over, ladies. If you want to continue gossiping, please do it in your own time and stop wasting mine. I’ve got a job to do.”

The executives blinked, turned in their swivel chairs, and glared at this woman. Bryan lowered his hand and smiled. Gavin flinched and shrunk in his seat.

“I’m Zoe Tate,” she said. “I was hired by Angelo Industries to investigate the health and safety requirements at your intended fracking plant site at Lakota Forest. First of all, I would like to thank you all for your very kind help and assistance with our research project. It’s not always easy to get companies to comply with our requests for information, but Angelo Industries has been very easy to work with.”

“We aim to please,” Bryan said with a smile that curled one corner of his mouth.

Zoe blushed and tucked a finger of hair behind her ear.

“Lights, please,” she said.

Gavin switched off the lights and turned on the projector.

“I appreciate you’re all busy people, so let me tell you the result first, and then we can go through the details,” Zoe said. “The good news is that there is very little risk of long term environmental damage at the intended site. The earth is strong and there is no sign that it might give way to fracking techniques. But there are some minor issues I would like to go over-”

A head-shaped shadow rose from the bottom of the projected image.

“Thank you, Miss Tate,” Bryan’s voice said. “And thank you for your presentation. If you’ll notify Andrew of the details of the issues you mentioned, we’ll get to work in solving them. Good day.”

Bryan turned and headed out the door, followed by all but one of the executives. The projector was turned off, the lights back on.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Gavin said.

“No,” Zoe said. “Not so bad.”

Andrew Garfield, the executive in charge of new projects, approached and took a copy of the ring binders Zoe had prepared.

“I’m just about to have lunch,” Andrew said. “Would you care to join me? We might go over the issues in person.”

“I’m afraid I have other plans,” Zoe said, her eyes on the last of the executives as they went through the door.

“Don’t mind Bryan,” Andrew said. “He can be testy at times.”

“You’re telling me,” Zoe said.

Andrew smiled politely and headed out the door with the binder under his arm.

Gavin checked his watch.

“That gives us an extra hour for lunch,” he said. “Where shall we eat? I heard of this really good Chinese place just down the road.”

“I have plans,” Zoe said, picking up her things.

“Seriously?” Gavin said. “I thought that was just a line to get rid of the suit.”

“Nope,” Zoe said.

“All righty then,” Gavin said. “Looks like it’ll just be me.” He sighed. “I can just see my fortune cookie now: ‘You will die unhappy and alone’.”

“Your cheap manipulation tricks won’t work on me,” Zoe said.

“Maybe I’ll ask Rosetta,” Gavin said.

“Good luck,” Zoe said.

“Have a good time,” Gavin said.

“I’ll try to,” Zoe said.

She felt the heat rise to her cheeks, and the smile spread across her lips as she stepped out of the meeting room and into the corridor.

# 2

ZOE AND BRYAN fell back onto their pillows, a thin layer of sweat on their faces.

"Thank you," Zoe said, panting. "I needed that."

"You're not the only one," Bryan said.

Zoe felt the cool silk blankets against her skin. The Hope and Anchor was one of the better hotels in town, and afforded them a view over the river and market.

"Stressful day at work?" Bryan said.

"Like you wouldn't believe," Zoe said. "I've got a new client. He's very demanding."

"I'll bet," Bryan said. "I hope he's not too tough on you."

"I don't think he knows how to be otherwise," Zoe said.

"Hm," Bryan said. "Sounds like a problem. I hope he's at least attractive. Better to have someone good looking screaming at you than someone who's not."

"Oh, he's good looking all right," Zoe said. "But he doesn't scream at me. He's just cold and hard to read."

"Many bosses are," Bryan said. "They use it as a smokescreen for how they really feel. A boss has to appear calm and in control at all times."

"Still," Zoe said. "He could crack a smile now and then."

Bryan's harsh demeanor in the meeting room was gone. He smiled a smile that turned his eyes up, into beautiful sparkling pools.

"Why did you end the meeting so abruptly?" Zoe said. "You could have let me go over the details."

"I thought you hated giving presentations?" Bryan said.

"I do," Zoe said. "But after I've done all the work I'd prefer to go through it anyway."

"I thought I was doing you a favor," Bryan said.

"You did," Zoe said. "But next time let me know so I won't have to prepare all the documents."

"Noted," Bryan said. "But let's face it, you would have done it anyway."

"Not necessarily," Zoe said.

"Yes necessarily," Bryan said. "It's not in you to do a bad job. It's one of the reasons you're my girl."

"A workaholic who finds a perfectionist attractive," Zoe said, rolling her eyes. "How original."

Bryan grinned and kissed Zoe on the forehead.

"But you know, there are some issues we need to cover," Zoe said.

"I read your report," Bryan said. He quoted from memory. "'There is very little chance any long term damage will occur to the area or the local residents of Lakota.'"

"Show off," Zoe said.

"What can I say?" Bryan said. "I hang on your every word."

"I'm going to take a shower," Zoe said.

She climbed out of bed, completely at ease with her nakedness. Bryan liked the way she looked, and she enjoyed the way he looked at her.

The water was almost scalding, the way she liked it. Steam billowed up in great thick mists in the cubicle. She let it wash her body, and smiled at the intimate moments she'd just shared with Bryan. She dried her hair with a towel as she came back to the hotel room.

Bryan sat on the edge of the bed in his underwear in thoughtful repose.

"Bryan?" Zoe said. "Is everything okay?"

“Everything’s fine,” Bryan said. “In fact, more than fine. I know we agreed not to talk about this, but I can’t help it. I’ve been thinking…”

“Here comes trouble,” Zoe said.

Bryan looked uncomfortable. He was out of his comfort zone. He only ever looked that way when he had absolutely no idea how to proceed in a given situation. This from a man who always knew what to do.

“Zoe… I want to take the next step with you,” Bryan said. “Meeting like this is great, and I really enjoy it. Obviously. But I want more. I want you.”

Zoe blinked in surprise.

“I thought we were just having fun,” she said.

“We were,” Bryan said. “I mean, we are. It’s just… I don’t want to spoil what we already have, but I’ve been thinking of you a lot and I think I want more.”

“How much more?” Zoe said, sitting beside him.

“I want it all,” Bryan said. “Living together, exclusivity, the works.”

“I’m not seeing anyone else,” Zoe said.

“Neither am I,” Bryan said. “And I want to keep it that way. Forever. I want to wake up beside you in the mornings and look forward to seeing you every evening. And if we meet sometimes in the middle of the day like this, all the better.”

Zoe nodded, thinking it through.

“I’ve got a lot going on in my life,” she said.

“I know,” Bryan said.

“Are you sure about this?” Zoe said.

“Absolutely,” Bryan said. “I can’t think of anyone – or anything – I want more.”

“I come with baggage,” Zoe said.

“We both do,” Bryan said. “But I’m willing to try, if you are. If things don’t work out, then we can just keep what we have now. This is new territory for me. New for a long time, anyway.”

“Do you think I’m any different?” Zoe said.

“You always seem so calm, so in control,” Bryan said.

Zoe laughed.

“*You’re* saying *that* to *me*?” she said. “It’s all cover, I assure you. This is the first serious relationship I’ve had since… Well, you know.”

“We’ve both had our heartaches in the past,” Bryan said. “We deserve something strong and long lasting.”

“So, we just need to bite the bullet,” Zoe said.

“They’re the ones who’re going to have to bite it,” Bryan said. “We’re the ones who’re going to have to pull the trigger.”

“What if they refuse to accept it?” Zoe said. “If they refuse to accept us?”

“They’ll have no choice,” Bryan said. “They’ll get used to it. We can’t spend our lives living for them and wait until they’re all grown up. Each of them lost a parent. They deserve to have another one. And I can’t think of anyone I would rather have as a mother to my daughter than you.”

Zoe smiled.

“Now that’s romantic,” she said.

“You asked for it,” Bryan said. “And you got it – both barrels.”

Zoe wrapped her arms around Bryan.

“Do you think she’ll like me?” she said. “I always wanted a daughter.”

“You’ll get on like a house on fire,” Bryan said.

“Is that supposed to be good?” Zoe said. “You’re saying there’ll be a lot of fallout?”

“All right,” Bryan said. “Like two peas in a pod.”

“Locked together forever with no way to escape?” Zoe said.

“Is there any way I can say you’ll get on well without this kind of response?” Bryan said. “You don’t hear me worrying about yours.”

“Boys are easier,” Zoe said. “Make a few comments about things he likes, play a few games with him, and he’s wrapped around your little finger. Girls are harder.”

“I won’t deny that,” Bryan said.

Zoe wrapped her arms around Bryan’s head and kissed him on the lips. He responded, kissing her on the face and neck, working his way down…

“No!” Zoe said, pushing Bryan’s head away.

“Aw!” Bryan said. “Why not?”

Zoe put on her underwear and pants.

“Because unlike you, who is God of his company, I actually have to get back to work,” she said.

“Do you really?” Bryan said. “Can’t you just tell them you’re wining and dining a prospective new client?”

“I think I’ve wined and dined enough,” Zoe said.

Bryan began to get dressed too. He stole glances at Zoe.

“Are you sure you can’t stay a little longer?” he said.

“Certain,” Zoe said.

“One hundred percent?” Bryan said.

“One thousand percent,” Zoe said.

Bryan sneaked up behind her and kissed her on the neck, nipping at her skin with his teeth.

Zoe closed her eyes and sighed.

“I think I just missed my bus,” she said, dropping her bag. “It’s a bummer because they only come every hour.”

“Don’t forget, you’re now in charge of the biggest account at Environment Solutions,” Bryan said. “They should be wrapped around your little finger.”

“I don’t like to take advantage of the situation,” Zoe said.

“Another reason you’re perfect for me,” Bryan said. “You come complete with gold-plated morals.”

“I can be immoral sometimes,” Zoe said. She pushed Bryan back onto the bed. “In fact, let me show you…”

# 3

AARON GOT his chemistry books out of his locker and tucked them in his bag. He closed his locker door and jumped a foot in the air.

"I wish you wouldn't do that!" Aaron said.

"Do what?" Pete said.

"Creep up behind my door and stand there with that expression on your face," Aaron said.

"What expression?" Pete said. "This is my default expression."

"Then you need to hit the reset button," Aaron said. "You're terrifying when you smile."

"People say I have a beautiful smile," Pete said.

"Your mom says that," Aaron said. "Moms don't count as people."

Aaron slung his bag over his shoulder and weaved through the other students in the corridor.

"But I do have something exciting to tell you about," Pete said. "You're never going to believe this, but I was watching a lecture by Jack Horner – you know, the dinosaur guy – and he was saying how all the dinosaur fossils we've discovered so far might not all be different. He said the fossils we have might only show the gradual change in age, like teenagers to adults, adults to the old. Isn't that great? I can't wait to tell Rae about it."

Pete's life mission was to bombard Mrs. Rae, their science teacher, with as many theories counter to established science as he could find. He often didn't believe what he read, but he couldn't help pestering Mrs. Rae with his nonsense. But so far she had always managed to counter his arguments.

"Are you listening?" Pete said.

"Yeah," Aaron said. "I'm listening."

And he was, but with only about five percent of his brain. The rest was focused on the memories that floated through his mind. Seven years ago – almost to the day – he had seen his father for the last time. He'd come up to his bedroom to wish him goodnight, give him a gift, a kiss on the forehead, and then left his life forever. To disappear without saying goodbye wasn't like Aaron's father at all, and for the past seven years he'd been fostering his own theories of his disappearance.

When Aaron turned to Pete he caught the end of his monologue.

"…I'll have Rae in a corner with that one, don't you think?" Pete said.

"Sure," Aaron said without commitment.

"What's wrong with you today?" Pete said. "I present you with material that will drive Rae crazy and you're not even listening to me."

"Sorry," Aaron said. "I just have other things on my mind."

"What could possibly be more important than this?" Pete said. "A chance to embarrass Rae. It's the chance of a lifetime!"

Mrs. Rae was a strict teacher, and ensured a mutual exchange of respect at all times. One such requirement was for the students to wait outside her classroom for her to arrive. The class had instinctively divided themselves into two groups, one along either wall. There was a clear social gap between them. There were the cool skirts-hitched-up girls with the sporty muscular guys on the left, and the dorky pigeon-chested guys with bookish girls on the right. Talk about subscribing to stereotypes. Aaron and Pete joined the latter.

"It's totally going to work," Pete said. "Rae is going to hit the roof, you watch."

Despite a world increasingly dominated and shaped by tech geeks with high foreheads and even higher IQs, the social strata at Moore's High School was still in the primeval stages of critique. Someone on a sports team still 'outranked' someone on the chess or electronics team. One such figure was Clint, captain of the football team. He made a comment, and it must have

been funny because his friends howled with laughter, slapping their knees and grinning like idiots. With the glances they made toward Rahul, the Indian exchange student, Aaron supposed he must have been the butt of the joke.

Clint looked around at the other people in the class, looking for fresh bait. The kids lined up along Aaron's wall diverted their eyes down, looking at the floor, the ceiling, anywhere but across the corridor. Clint was at his most vicious when he was in a good mood, and they all knew it. The only person who didn't lower his gaze was Aaron, who looked at Cassie, Clint's girlfriend.

She was pretty, tall, with short blonde hair. She wasn't a cheerleader, but she had the build for it. She was smarter than the others by a considerable margin, which only made her worse. To be stupid and do cruel things was one thing, but to be smart and know what they were doing, that was another. The reason Aaron knew she was smart was because of her grades. She got the minimum amount necessary to stay in the top sets for everything, no doubt keeping her parents happy, but low enough not to incite dislike from her peers. She and her friends were all part of the brat pack, each with rich parents. Cassie was an enigma to Aaron, not that he had ever really given her much thought.

His mind began to wander when Clint caught him looking at Cassie. Aaron hastily looked away, but it was too late.

"What are you looking at, Tate?" Clint said. "Were you checking out my girlfriend?"

"Clint, leave it," Cassie said, placing her hand on his arm.

"You want a taste, is that it?" Clint said.

"Clint, come on," Cassie said.

"You do, don't you?" Clint said to Aaron. "You little perv! I bet he does! He wants to do things to you, babe. No wonder your father ran away, Tate. Who would want an embarrassment like you as a son?"

It was a direct hit. Aaron's face screwed up in rage, but he had not totally taken leave of his senses. Clint was big, and any violence was bound to end badly for Aaron, who was small and weedy.

He blustered past Clint and headed for the boys' bathroom. Clint's cohorts laughed and cheered, making sniveling, crying motions with their hands and faces. But before Aaron got to the toilet, Mrs. Rae floated down the corridor. She wore long billowing dresses that gave the appearance she was floating. The students followed her into the classroom and took their seats.

Mrs. Rae stood in the doorframe.

"Well?" she said to Aaron. "Aren't you going to join us?"

Aaron scrubbed his brain for an excuse not to enter the room, but none came to mind. He entered the classroom and took his seat beside Pete.

"You have to learn to ignore him," Pete said. "Idiots like him have nothing useful to say."

But Aaron couldn't let go. He fumed, turning Clint's words over in his mind.

"Now," Mrs. Rae said. "Last lesson we looked at the period of Earth's history when the dinosaurs existed, and their eventual extinction. Today we shall learn about rocks and how they tell us what happened in the past."

Pete wet his lips with his tongue in anticipation and raised his hand.

"Miss," Pete said. "I saw an interesting lecture last night. It was about how all the dinosaur fossils we've got might not have all been different species after all, but stages in a dinosaur's natural life cycle."

"Who said that?" Mrs. Rae said.

"The esteemed Jack Horner," Pete said. "What do you think of that?"

"I suppose he could be right," Mrs. Rae said. "But until he or someone else discovers evidence to support his idea, that's all it is. Just an idea."

"But it's a good idea, don't you think?" Pete said, still trying to get a rise out of Mrs. Rae.

“There are many good ideas in the world that haven’t been adopted by the mainstream yet,” Mrs. Rae said. “But there’s no reason to accept them until there’s plausible evidence. Now, onto today’s lesson…”

Pete’s shoulders sagged.

“Go deep enough into the Earth and you can see the entire history of our planet,” Mrs. Rae said to the class. “In 1909 a paleontologist called Charles Walcott discovered a rock formation called the Burgess Shale. It catalogues a large swathe of our planet’s animal history. We can even see our earliest ancestors – the first creatures to have backbones and spinal columns. We can see many creatures, most of which – ninety-nine percent, in fact – are now extinct. They did not survive. But our ancestors did. And they went on to evolve into a plethora of new creatures – including the dinosaurs.

“But how is it that we know these things with any certainty? How can we be so sure they are correct? Because of the overwhelming evidence. We have found fossils and other artefacts left behind, encased in amber, or deep within tar pits, or in the icy landscapes of the arctic, and in the caves of Africa and Asia.

“Now, you’re all going to split up into twos. You’re going to analyze these rock samples with the use of microscopes and identify what kind of rock type they are. Feel free to use your textbooks. As usual, we’re going to pair up with different partners.”

Mrs. Rae went through the register, coming down the list.

“Pete, you’re with Graham,” she said.

“Oh great,” Pete said, lowering his voice. “I get to spend all class with the smell of pickled onions.”

“Aaron,” Mrs. Rae said. “You’re with Cassie.”

Pete turned his wide eyes on Aaron.

“You’re so lucky!” he said.

“What are you talking about?” Aaron said. “Clint’s going to kill me if I look at his girlfriend the wrong way.”

At that very moment Clint glared at Aaron as if he had somehow rigged the whole thing.

“This could be your ticket out from under Clint,” Pete said. “Don’t you see? Control Cassie and you control him.”

“How am I supposed to control Cassie?” Aaron said.

“Don’t blow it!” Pete said helpfully before moving away.

Cassie sat down with a huff beside Aaron, dropping her books loudly on the workbench. Clearly she was as excited about the pairing as Clint was.

“Hi,” Aaron said.

Cassie looked at him as if he had just burped in her face. She sat there, tapping her pen on her notepad, watching the clock. Other pairs were already discussing animatedly, figuring out the answers.

“Shall we get started on these rocks?” Aaron said. “Would you like to do the first one?”

He picked up the box Mrs. Rae left on their table.

“You know, believe it or not but I’m actually not a bad guy,” Aaron said. “Despite whatever Clint has told you, I’m the same as any of the other guys in school. I might not be good at sports, but they’re not as good at studying. We all have our strengths and weaknesses.”

“I don’t believe in weakness,” Cassie said.

“Then you’re not going to like me,” Aaron said. “I’ve got just about every weakness under the sun.”

“Like what?” Cassie said.

Aaron took his glasses off.

“Try these,” he said.

Cassie peered through them. She took them off and rubbed her eyes.

“Your eyes are terrible!” she said.

Aaron reached into his pocket and extracted an asthma pump.

“If you think that’s bad, check this out,” Aaron said. “If I run around too much or get out of breath, sometimes my lungs collapse. Without this I’ll die.”

“How does it work?” Cassie said.

“You just breathe in, press the button and a chemical comes out that helps expand my lungs,” Aaron said. “But the chances of me getting out of breath are pretty slim anyway.”

“Why?” Cassie said.

“Flat feet,” Aaron said. “I can’t walk or run very far without them killing.”

“You are weak,” Cassie said. “Good thing we don’t rely on survival of the fittest any more.”

Aaron smiled. He knew she was smart. He took a deep breath. Hopefully he’d softened her up with how weak he was and she would take pity on him.

“Look,” Aaron said. “I know we hardly know each other, but I was wondering if you could do me a favor.”

“Like what?” Cassie said.

“Would you mind speaking with Clint and getting him off my back?” Aaron said. “High school’s hard enough without guys like him beating on me.”

“What makes you think I have any control over him?” Cassie said. “You saw what happened in the corridor.”

“I also notice it never happens to you,” Aaron said. “He likes you.”

“I’m his girlfriend,” Cassie said.

“So you have some sway over him?” Aaron said.

Cassie hesitated.

“Yes,” she said. “But I’m going to use it myself one day.”

“What do you mean?” Aaron said.

“Life is about knowing the right people,” Cassie said. “Better to get a head start now.”

“Who said that?” Aaron said.

“My dad,” Cassie said.

“Clint is the right kind of person?” Aaron said.

Cassie shrugged.

“I don’t make the rules,” she said.

“How are you doing?” Mrs. Rae said, coming over.

“We’re all done,” Aaron said.

“But you haven’t written anything down,” Mrs. Rae said.

Aaron picked up the small pieces of rock and held each one between his fingers, occasionally peering at them with his naked eye.

“This one’s sedimentary,” Aaron said. “This one metamorphic. And this one’s igneous.”

Mrs. Rae was taken aback.

“Uh, right,” she said, moving on to the next pair. “Carry on.”

“How did you do that?” Cassie said.

“I want to be a seismologist when I get older,” Aaron said. “I need to know all the different rock types. So, can you help me with Clint?”

Cassie pursed her lips.

“We might be able to come to an arrangement,” she said.

“What kind of arrangement?” Aaron said.

“I help you, you help me,” Cassie said. “It’s the way the world works.”

“Are you going to be a politician?” Aaron said.

“A businesswoman,” Cassie said. “If I help you with Clint, you can help me with geology.”

Aaron looked at Cassie with newfound respect, though he did his best to keep it off his face.

“Don’t look so surprised,” Cassie said. “Even bimbos have brains.”

“Okay class,” Mrs. Rae said. “Return to your seats, please.”

Cassie picked up her things and left. Cassie Angelo might have been many things, but a bimbo was not one of them.

Pete returned to his seat beside Aaron.

“So, what happened?” he said. “You and Cassie looked mighty cozy huddled up over here.”

“I hope it didn’t look like that,” Aaron said. “That’s the last thing that would happen, and the last one I would ever want Clint to think he saw.”

“I definitely saw something, a spark, between the two of you,” Pete said.

“Will you leave off?” Aaron said. “She has about as much interest in me as I have in her. Nothing will ever happen.”

“Not with that attitude,” Pete said.

“We might have come to an arrangement,” Aaron said. “Hopefully I won’t have to deal with her too much.”

# 4

AARON SHUT the front door and dumped his backpack on the floor. He breathed in a deep nostril of the delicious aromas coming from the kitchen and followed them like a mouse to cheese. Zoe was bent over the oven, checking the consistency of whatever was in one of the pots.

"What are you cooking?" Aaron said.

Zoe started, a spaghetti noodle hanging from her lips. She sucked it into her mouth.

"I didn't hear you come back," Zoe said. "I'm cooking your favorite: spaghetti Bolognese."

"With meatballs?" Aaron said.

"With *real* meatballs," Zoe said. "Vegetarian ones for me."

Aaron clapped his hands and jiggled on the spot.

"What's the special occasion?" he said.

"Nothing special," Zoe said. "I just thought you'd like it today. I bought some milkshake too. It's in the fridge."

Aaron took the milkshake out of the fridge, shook it vigorously and put it to his lips.

"Glass," Zoe said.

Aaron took a glass from the overhead cupboard and filled it with thick milkshake.

"You're back early," Aaron said.

"I wanted to cook you dinner," Zoe said.

"How did the big meeting go today?" Aaron said.

"Oh, it went fine," Zoe said. "I got the contract."

"That's great!" Aaron said. "Shall I open a bottle of wine?"

"Yes, please," Zoe said.

"Red?" Aaron said.

"Please," Zoe said.

Aaron pulled a bottle from the wine rack. It was cheap, less than ten dollars a bottle, but it was his mother's favorite. He screwed the corkscrew into the cork and, with a little difficulty, pulled it out with a pop. He poured a glass and put it on the table.

Zoe looked at her son and smiled a smile that, to Aaron, looked very distracted.

# 5

CASSIE WAS SURPRISED to find her father's limousine parked outside their ten bedroom villa on the outskirts of town. She was surprised because he was *never* home early. He most often returned long after she had turned in for the night and she only really ever saw him at the weekends. She didn't mind. It was how she had grown up.

Rosetta, her father's assistant and driver, smiled at Cassie as she approached. She was stern-faced most of the time but had a soft spot for Cassie.

"Hey Cass, what's up?" Rosetta said.

"Nothing much," Cassie said. "Is father home?"

"Yes," Rosetta said. "He's inside. He wants to speak with you."

"Speak with me?" Cassie said.

A tremor went through her. The last time her father needed to speak with her it was after he had discovered she'd been skiving off school Wednesday afternoons to go shopping. The problem was, unless he was clear about what she had done wrong right off the bat she was likely to end up revealing something different to whatever sin he thought she'd committed. She decided she would act calm and innocent until he revealed what it was she had done.

"Do you know what about?" Cassie said.

"I'm afraid you'll have to speak to your father about that," Rosetta said.

Cassie knew through hard experience Rosetta would never tell her any more than that. It would have been easier to get blood out of a stone.

"Your new arm looks good," Cassie said, turning toward the house.

"Thanks," Rosetta said. "It's from your father. It's top of the line."

Cassie opened the heavy oak front door of their house, which muttered a deep foreboding groan. She could hear her father's voice from the direction of his study. He was on his cell phone. Of course he was. He was on his cell more often than she was, and she herself was an Olympic-level user. Business acquaintances often remarked that they had known her father for more than ten years and felt they had only ever had one conversation with him.

Cassie peeked her head into his study, waiting until his voice pointed away from her. He always paced while on the phone. She saw him in profile. He looked more frazzled than usual, and kept tripping over his words, as if he wasn't sure what to say next in the conversation. It was not an expression Cassie had seen on her father's face often.

Cassie turned and headed toward the living room-cum-kitchen. She dumped her bag on the floor, picked up the TV remote and turned it on. A game show was on. The presenter said something vaguely funny and the audience laughed. *Gotta love canned laughter.*

Cassie took out a loaf of bread from the bread bin and began making a ham sandwich. She added a dollop of mayonnaise and moved to the island.

Bryan, still on his cell, came into the living room – a first. He never brought work into the rest of the house. He caught Cassie's eye, covered the handset with a hand and said, "Be with you in a minute." Then he turned back to the phone. "I know, I know. But I'm not sure if I can provide you with those documents right now. We're still going through the analysis phase. I'll let you know closer to the time. Yes, all right. Bye."

He hung up and joined Cassie in the kitchen.

"You're home early," Cassie said.

"I wanted to speak with you about something," Bryan said, switching the TV off.

Cassie's heart rose into her throat, but she acted nonchalant.

"Do you want something to drink?" Bryan said.

"Martini on the rocks?" Cassie said.

Bryan gave her a flat look.

“Orange juice, please,” Cassie said.

Bryan poured two glasses and set them on the large kitchen island. He put hers on the oak beam through the middle – forgetting the coaster – which he always did, so Cassie slid one under her glass. Bryan downed his orange juice in one go and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. He sat his glass down on the table, but for once Cassie did not tidy up after him. He was frazzled and distracted.

“What’s up, Dad?” Cassie said.

“‘What’s up, Dad?’” Bryan said. “Don’t you mean ‘What’s up, Doc?’”

He smiled with a child’s grin. He was nervous, Cassie realized. Maybe it wasn’t anything she had done after all.

“I…” Bryan said, before looking at his shoes.

“What?” Cassie said.

She had never seen her father this way before. She was beginning to get nervous.

“Is it the company?” Cassie said. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” Bryan said. “It has nothing to do with the company.”

“What, then?” Cassie said.

He looked up at her, his eyes searching her face, reading her expression.

“I can’t tell you,” he said.

“Then what did you want to see me for?” Cassie said.

Bryan didn’t answer. Cassie stood up.

“I’m going to go change,” she said. “I’m meeting friends tonight. That’s if you think you’re okay to be alone tonight?”

“I’ll be fine,” Bryan said.

Cassie left, shaking her head. Just what was going on in the world?

# 6

"GET THE PLACEMATS and cutlery ready," Zoe said.

While Aaron dressed the table, Zoe stirred the vegetables, simmering in tomato sauce, and turned the hobs off. She drained the water from the noodles and then dished some out onto two plates using a pair of tongs. Then she spooned some of the sauce into the middle of the noodles, adding meatballs that she cooked in a separate pan. She took a deep breath before carrying the plates over to the dining table.

"Looks great," Aaron said.

"Bon appetite," Zoe said.

They dug into their meals, Aaron going first for the meatballs, while Zoe took another sip of her wine to gird her spirit. *The moment of truth.*

"We have a good life, don't we?" Zoe said.

"I guess so," Aaron said, winding the noodles around his fork.

"You guess so?" Zoe said.

"School's hard sometimes," Aaron said.

"We all have things we find difficult sometimes," Zoe said. "I don't always like my job."

"But at least you have a choice," Aaron said. "I *have* to go to school."

"Only until you're eighteen, and then you can choose for yourself what you'd like to do," Zoe said.

"I suppose," Aaron said.

"It's just been you and me for so long I was wondering if you'd considered what it would be like to have one or two more people around here," Zoe said.

"You're going to get some lodgers?" Aaron said.

"No, I was thinking of something more long-term than that," Zoe said.

"You're going to adopt?" Aaron said.

"No," Zoe said. "I was thinking… what if we had some people come live with us for a while. We wouldn't have to make a decision now, but we could think about it and meet them and see if we get on well, and if we do, we could make it permanent."

"Permanent?" Aaron said. "Which people are you talking about?"

"People like us," Zoe said.

Zoe put her hand to her forehead. She felt a headache coming on. She didn't know if it was caused by the wine or the situation.

"You mean you want to house some refugees like the ones in Europe from Syria?" Aaron said.

"No, not refugees," Zoe said. "People who we might share our lives with one day."

The living room phone rang. Zoe debated about whether or not to answer it, turning toward her chair, before changing her mind and turning back to Aaron, before turning back to the phone again.

"One second," Zoe said.

She got up and answered the phone.

"Hello?" she said.

"Have you told him yet?" Bryan said.

"You know, it's customary to have a pleasantry or two when speaking on the phone," Zoe said.

There was a pause.

"Well?" Bryan said. "Have you?"

"No," Zoe said. "You?"

“No,” Bryan said with a sigh. “It’s not as easy as I expected. She came home, we chatted for a bit, and I was about to tell her, when the words wouldn’t come out.”

“I was just about to tell Aaron,” Zoe said. “I cooked him his favorite meal to grease the wheels.”

“Favorite meal!” Bryan said. Zoe could hear him smacking his forehead with his palm. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Do you want to call it off?” Zoe said. “It’s not too late to go back.”

“No,” Bryan said. “Is that what you want?”

“No,” Zoe said.

“I face boardrooms full of CEOs and VPs every day and yet I’m afraid of speaking to my own thirteen-year-old daughter,” Bryan said.

“I know how you feel,” Zoe said. “I’m really not sure how this is supposed to go.”

“Me too,” Bryan said. “I haven’t been in the dating game for years.”

“It’s not the dating game I’m worried about,” Zoe said. “It’s the introducing-my-kid-to-the-new-man-in-my-life game I’m concerned with.”

“Right,” Bryan said.

“This was your idea,” Zoe said.

“I know, I know,” Bryan said. “What should we do?”

“We should act like adults and bite the bullet and tell them,” Zoe said. “Like we agreed.”

“But I’m not sure if she’s going to like it,” Bryan said.

“They’ll get used to it,” Zoe said. “We’ve been putting this off for a while. Maybe they won’t react as badly as we thought.”

“I hope not,” Bryan said.

“So, what do you want to do?” Zoe said. “Pull out? Carry on with the relationship we already have?”

“No,” Bryan said. “I want you, like I said. I’ll find the courage. I’ll tell her.”

“So will I,” Zoe said. “Good luck.”

“You too,” Bryan said.

Zoe hung up and returned to the kitchen. Aaron no longer sat at the dining table. He stood at the kitchen sink, rinsing off his plate. He sat it on the drying rack and wiped his hands on the dishcloth.

“Where are you going?” Zoe said.

“I’ve finished,” Aaron said.

“I thought we could talk for a while,” Zoe said.

“I’ve got lots of homework to do,” Aaron said.

“Do it later,” Zoe said.

“It’s due tomorrow,” Aaron said.

“Then I’ll give you a note,” Zoe said.

“A note?” Aaron said. “A note for what?”

“To explain why you couldn’t do your homework,” Zoe said.

“Why couldn’t I do my homework?” Aaron said.

“Because we were talking,” Zoe said.

“But we’re not talking,” Aaron said.

“But we’re about to,” Zoe said. “Sit down.”

Aaron frowned at his mother, his eyebrows drawing down into a straight line across his eyes like his father’s used to. Zoe shook her head, dispelling the image of her dead husband.

“Sit down, please,” Zoe said.

“This sounds serious,” Aaron said.

“It is serious,” Zoe said.

“I swear, I haven’t done anything wrong,” Aaron said.

“I know you haven’t,” Zoe said. “You’re a good boy. An adult. Which is why I’m going to treat you like one.”

“You’re going to make me get a job I hate?” Aaron said.

“What?” Zoe said. “No. And not all adults hate their jobs.”

“Most seem to,” Aaron said.

Zoe took a deep breath to score a line under the conversation and begin again.

“I have something to tell you,” she said.

“Oh God,” Aaron said. “This really doesn’t sound good.”

# 7

CASSIE WAS AN ARTIST with makeup. She never put on too much, preferring to verge on having too little. She had a natural beauty that makeup only detracted from. She'd changed into a short navy blue dress and matching heels. As always, she looked fabulous. As she added eyeliner, she could see Bryan stepping into her doorway in her dressing table's mirror.

"Are you ready to tell me whatever it is you wanted to tell me before?" Cassie said.

"Sit down," Bryan said. "I have some news for you."

"I'm already sitting," Cassie said. "Can't it wait until tomorrow? I'm going out to meet friends now."

"It'll only take a few minutes," Bryan said. *With any luck.*

"Go on, then," Cassie said, folding her arms.

She looked just like her mother when she did that, especially with that expectant expression on her face.

Bryan shook his head.

"Come through to the front room a minute," he said.

"You said this was only going to take a minute," Cassie said.

"It is," Bryan said. "Just take a seat."

Cassie sighed. She followed Bryan through to the living room.

"All right, here goes," Bryan said, shutting his eyes. "I've met someone."

Cassie shrugged.

"So what?" she said. "You meet people all the time at work."

"No, I mean I've met someone special," Bryan said.

"You mean, like, with a mental handicap?" Cassie said.

"Are you deliberately being difficult?" Bryan said.

"Are you being deliberately mysterious?" Cassie said. "Why don't you just tell me?"

"I've been working with someone, from another company, and we get on really well," Bryan said. "We've been dating."

He closed his eyes and tensed up, preparing himself for the inevitable explosion heading his way.

"I'm assuming it's a woman?" Cassie said.

"Yes, of course it's a woman!" Bryan said.

"How long has this been going on?" Cassie said.

"A few months," Bryan said.

"A few months and you never told me?" Cassie said.

"I never told you when I went out on any dates," Bryan said.

"You've had *other* dates?" Cassie said.

A shiver went through her body.

"Of course I have," Bryan said. "But this is the first serious one. She's kind, smart and beautiful. I'm ready to take our relationship to the next level. And that means meeting you."

Cassie was silent a moment before letting out a deep lungful of air.

"Thank God for that!" she said.

"You're relieved?" Bryan said.

Cassie put her hand to her chest.

"Of course I'm relieved!" she said. "My heart was beating a mile a minute! After all your talk about introducing someone and new relationships… I was starting to think you were getting into crossdressing or something, or about to introduce your boyfriend. Not that that would have been a problem. The boyfriend part, I mean."

“No, no,” Bryan said. “Nothing like that.”

“You nearly gave me a heart attack!” Cassie said. “All I can say is, it’s about time.”

“You’re not angry?” Bryan said.

“No,” Cassie said. “Why would I be angry? I think it’s good you’re meeting someone. It’s been a long time since Mom left and you deserve to be happy.”

“I must say, you’ve taken me by surprise,” Bryan said.

“Why?” Cassie said. “Don’t you think I’d want you to see someone else?”

“Actually, no,” Bryan said. “I didn’t.”

“Then I’m pleased to disappoint you,” Cassie said. “You only live once. You should be out there, living it up.”

“Thank you,” Bryan said with a chuckle. “So, we’re cool?”

“We’re super cool,” Cassie said.

Bryan got up and hugged Cassie.

“Careful of my dress,” Cassie said.

“You know, I’ve been stressing out about telling you this all day,” Bryan said.

“Well, you shouldn’t have,” Cassie said.

“I thought we could meet up some time soon,” Bryan said. “We’ll go to a restaurant, chat over a meal so you get to know each other a bit.”

“Sounds great,” Cassie said.

“How about tomorrow evening?” Bryan said.

“Fine,” Cassie said. “Can I go now?”

“You most certainly can,” Bryan said, scratching his head. “Uh, be back by ten.”

“Will do,” Cassie said, heading out the door.

Bryan smiled to himself and stretched his arms out wide in victory. He fell back onto the sofa.

“Yes!” he said.

He felt like an innocent man who had been vindicated with unexpected new evidence. He wondered how Zoe was getting on.

# 8

AARON'S MOUTH hung open, his eyes wide with shock one moment, and then slitted and downcast the next. He was processing the information, but none of it was making sense to him. Finally, he looked up at his mother.

"Are you serious?" he said. "But you're still married."

"Your father's been gone for seven years," Zoe said. "The authorities assured us he was swallowed by a sinkhole."

"His camp was," Aaron said, "but he might still be around. He might have escaped."

"It was minus five outside and the sun was beginning to set," Zoe said. "It could only have gotten colder. And there were no snow mobile marks heading away from the camp."

"It might have snowed, covering his tracks," Aaron said.

"There were no weather reports about snow in the area that day," Zoe said.

"That doesn't mean there weren't any," Aaron said. "Forecasters have been wrong before. And it snowed the day before. Maybe Dad left the camp then, and it snowed and covered his tracks and then he never went back."

"The investigators interviewed the surrounding villages and towns," Zoe said. "No one had seen him, and there's no chance of him not being recognized – your father had introduced himself to all the locals the moment he had arrived."

Aaron jutted out his jaw.

"I know he's still alive," he said. "I just know it."

"Believing something is true doesn't make it true," Zoe said. "Believe me, I wish your father was still alive too, but after all this time don't you think he would have come and found us by now? He was a strong, brave man, full of life and adventure. There's nothing in this world that could have stopped him from coming back to us. Nothing."

Aaron looked at his hands in his lap.

"How long have you been seeing this new guy?" he said.

"Nine months," Zoe said.

"Nine months?" Aaron said. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I didn't want to bring anyone into your life who might disappear soon afterwards," Zoe said.

"There have been others?" Aaron said.

Zoe hesitated.

"No one serious," she said. "Only a few dates."

Aaron shook his head. He couldn't believe this was happening. His face contorted with anger.

"I want you to know that your opinion is very important to me," Zoe said, reaching across the table and squeezing Aaron's hand.

Aaron pulled his hand away.

"If that were true, you would have told me sooner," he said.

He calmly got to his feet, tucked in his chair, and headed upstairs.

# 9

"HEY," BRYAN SAID. "I was just thinking of you."

"Did you do it?" Zoe said.

"You know, it's customary to have a pleasantry or two when speaking on the phone," Bryan said with a smile in his voice.

"Did you?" Zoe said.

"I did," Bryan said.

"How'd it go?" Zoe said.

"Well, the house is still standing, and I don't have a knife in my ribs," Bryan said.

"That well, huh?" Zoe said.

"It actually went better than I could have hoped," Bryan said. "She said she's glad I'm seeing someone new."

"That's very mature of her," Zoe said.

"How did Aaron take it?" Bryan said.

"Not well," Zoe said. "I think he's hurt, like I've forgotten his father or something."

"What are you going to do?" Bryan said.

"I'll talk to him about it," Zoe said. "He'll come around."

"And if he doesn't?" Bryan said.

"He will," Zoe said.

"I said we might have dinner together tomorrow night," Bryan said. "What do you think?"

"Good idea," Zoe said. "The sooner we can all meet, the better. But first I have to make sure he doesn't disown me."

"Keep me informed," Bryan said.

# 10

HOW COULD his mother betray his father like this? He had only been gone for seven years! And she was already shopping for someone else! As if his father had never existed!

Aaron paced up and down the narrow space between his bed and wardrobe in his bedroom. He kicked a pile of dirty clothes on the floor.

There was a knock on the door.

"Aaron?" his mother's voice said.

Aaron said nothing.

"Aaron," Zoe said. "Can I come in?"

"Go away!" Aaron said.

"We need to talk," Zoe said.

"I don't have anything to say!" Aaron said.

"Then just listen," Zoe said.

"No!" Aaron said.

"Aaron…" Zoe said, her voice sad. "Please, let me come in."

"There's no lock on the door," Aaron said. "It's your house. You can do whatever you want."

"I won't come in without your permission," Zoe said. "I'll just sit out here. I'll talk, and any time you want me to come in just let me know, okay? I understand how you must be feeling. Really, I do. But you have to understand how I feel too. This hasn't been easy for me. I would never have mentioned this if it wasn't serious. Your father's been gone seven years. You didn't think we were going to carry on living like this forever, did you?

"Seven years is a long time to be on your own. I was lonely. I still am. Bryan doesn't want to replace your father – he knows he could never do that. But he would like to be your friend. I need you to do this for me. I need you to try."

Tears spilled down Aaron's cheeks. He wiped them away with his sleeve. He heard his mother get to her feet and begin to walk away. Before he knew what he was doing, he reached over and pushed the door open.

"Aaron?" Zoe said, peeking in through the gap. "Aaron, can I come in? Aaron?"

"Yes," Aaron said, his voice small and scared.

Zoe pushed the door open. Aaron sat on the edge of his bed. He couldn't bring himself to look at his mother.

"I never saw you cry," Aaron said. "When Dad…"

"Have you ever seen the wind blow?" Zoe said.

"No," Aaron said.

"That doesn't mean it's not there," Zoe said. "I cried more times for your father than I can count. But I had to be strong – for you. I want to stop crying. I want both of us to move on."

She wrapped her arms around Aaron.

"Oh, Aaron," she said. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt you. I didn't think you would be this upset. Just meet him, that's all I ask. If you don't like him, we'll talk about it and try to figure something else out. Okay? There's no pressure on you at all. All right?"

Aaron wiped his nose and nodded.

"Good boy," Zoe said. "I love you. You know that, right? Nothing means more to me than you. You're everything to me."

She hugged him again, and this time he responded, wrapping his own arms around his mother. They stayed like that for ten minutes before they broke apart, having dampened one another's clothes.

"I think I'm going to need that homework note after all," Aaron said.

Zoe smiled, her eyes shimmering pools.

“We’ll never forget your father,” she said. “He was my husband, the man who gave me you. He’s in you, and will be a part of you your whole life. There’s no way of getting away from that – even if you wanted to.”

Aaron smiled, and a snotty chuckle escaped his lips.

“How about we go downstairs and finish off our meal?” Zoe said. “I bought some ice cream especially for you. Come on.”

She stood up and held out her hand. Aaron took it and together, as mother and son, they descended the stairs.

“Who is he, anyway?” Aaron said.

“He’s a businessman,” Zoe said.

“The enemy, Dad used to say,” Aaron said.

“This one isn’t so bad,” Zoe said. “But you’ll get to see that for yourself. Oh, I almost forgot. You won’t be the only one going through this. There will be two of you.”

“What do you mean?” Aaron said.

“Bryan has a daughter,” Zoe said. “She’s your age. You used to say you wanted a sister. This could be your chance.”

“What’s her name?” Aaron said.

“Cassandra,” Zoe said. “Cassandra Angelo.”

# 11

WHY HER OWN FATHER, the CEO of a large and growing company, would be nervous about telling his own daughter about his decision to start seeing someone was a surprise to Cassie. She never expected a man like her father to be afraid of anything. But it turned out he was afraid of something: of losing Cassie, or at least her favor. Her mind turned to ways she might be able to exploit the situation. There was a nice pair of heels she had her eye on. Maybe if she spun her father the right way…

Mrs. Rae entered the classroom and addressed the students.

"Okay class," she said. "Get into the same pairs you were in yesterday."

"Aw," Clint said. "Do we have to?"

"Yes," Mrs. Rae said. "I've found this is the best way to encourage students to make friends outside their usual narrow groups. Take your seats please."

Take *your* seats, not take *a* seat. Cassie made a face at Clint as she sat down at the front of the class. Aaron was already hunched over his microscope, peering at a slide. *What a nerd.*

"Morning, Poindexter," she said to him.

"Morning," Aaron said. "Have a nice evening?"

"Not bad," Cassie said. "Nothing to write home about."

"Looks like we'll be seeing a lot more of each other from now on, huh?" Aaron said.

"Yeah well, what can you do?" Cassie said, glancing at Mrs. Rae. "They're in charge."

"I never thought I'd hear you say that," Aaron said.

"They're in senior positions," Cassie said. "What can I do but complain during PTA meetings?"

"So, you're okay with this?" Aaron said.

"There's nothing to be okay with," Cassie said. "But the world is the way the world is."

"That's very philosophical," Aaron said.

Cassie shrugged.

"At least now maybe you won't think of me as such an idiot," she said. "Let's just make the best of a bad situation."

"I don't think you're an idiot," Aaron said. "I think you're very smart."

"You do?" Cassie said. She couldn't hide her surprise.

"Sure," Aaron said. "You're in the top set for everything. Your grades are high enough to stop you from going down a set, low enough to make sure you don't look like someone like me to your friends."

"You noticed, huh?" Cassie said.

"I don't understand why you think their opinions are important enough to hold yourself back though," Aaron said.

"That's something that will forever prevent you from entering my group of friends," Cassie said.

"Thankfully," Aaron said. "I'm surprised you're taking this so calmly. I would have thought you'd go crazy at the damage it might do to your reputation."

Cassie snorted.

"You're not that important," she said.

Aaron smiled at the gentle rebuke.

"I have some cool stuff you might like in my room," he said. "Maybe I can show you sometime."

"If this is your way of coming on to me, it's not working," Cassie said.

“I’m not coming on to you,” Aaron said. “If things go as my mom hopes, we’ll practically be family.”

“Wait,” Cassie said. “What?”

“Our parents are dating,” Aaron said. “Mom seems happy about it, and your dad too, by the sound of it.”

“What do you mean they’re dating?” Cassie said, panic rising in her chest.

“They’re going out,” Aaron said. He frowned. “Mom said your dad told you. They’re an item. Which means we’re probably going to end up being stepbrother and sister.”

“No!” Cassie said. “You’re wrong!”

Her voice had risen, getting the attention of other pairs close to them.

“Wrong about what?” Aaron said, lowering his voice. “It’s nice to have someone to talk to about all this. I can sense us getting closer already. By the way, if you think I’m going to be letting Clint come over and use my stuff, think again.”

Cassie rocked back in her chair like she’d been dealt a knockout blow. She stood up and walked toward the door.

“Cassie, where are you going?” Mrs. Rae said.

“To the toilet,” Cassie said.

“Have you finished your work?” Mrs. Rae said.

“We’re almost done, Miss,” Aaron said. “Cassie did most of the work. I’m just finishing up now.”

Aaron winked conspiratorially at Cassie.

Mrs. Rae pursed her lips.

“All right then,” she said. “Be quick about it.”

Cassie left the classroom, the world seeming to spin underneath her. The moment she was through the door, she hit speed dial and called her father’s cell. She was redirected.

“Angelo Industries, Bryan Angelo’s office. Rosetta speaking, how can I help?”

“Rosetta, this is Cassie. I need to speak to Dad right now.”

“I’m afraid he’s in an important meeting at the moment,” Rosetta said. “Would you like to leave a message?”

“This is far more important,” Cassie said. “Get him on the phone!”

“If you leave a message I’ll get him to call you as soon as possible,” Rosetta said calmly. Duty first, as always.

Cassie ground her teeth.

“I’ve been involved in an accident,” she said.

“An accident?” Rosetta said. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Cassie said. “Just a few bumps and bruises. But it might turn critical. I’m heading to the hospital now. I need Dad’s insurance number so I can pay for treatment.”

“I can give it to you if you want,” Rosetta said.

“No,” Cassie said. “I’d like Dad to know I’m okay, to hear my voice. I know he’ll worry to death about me otherwise.”

*Please, please, please.*

“All right,” Rosetta said. “Give me a minute and I’ll get him for you.”

Cassie heard the phone being put down, and then movement in her office. A door opened, followed by muffled voices. Finally someone picked up the phone.

“Hello?” Bryan said.

“Dad, it’s me,” Cassie said.

“Are you all right?” Bryan said. “Rosetta told me you were in an accident.”

“I’m fine,” Cassie said. “There was no accident.”

“No accident?” Bryan said.

“I needed to get you out of your meeting,” Cassie said.

“I’ll see you at home,” Bryan said, his tone gruff.

“It’ll be too late by then,” Cassie said. “I need to talk to you about your new girlfriend.”

“What’s happened?” Bryan said.

“Nothing,” Cassie said. “I just have a question. This woman you’re seeing, you said she doesn’t mind about you having kids. Is there a reason for that?”

“A reason?” Bryan said. “Like what?”

“Like maybe she doesn’t mind because she has one herself?” Cassie said.

There was a pause on the end of the line. Cassie found herself hoping it was a problem with the line, not that her father was thinking.

“Hello?” Cassie said.

“Yeah, I’m here,” Bryan said.

“Well?” Cassie said.

“I thought I mentioned it last night,” Bryan said.

Cassie gripped the phone tight to her ear.

“Mentioned what?” she gasped.

“That Zoe-” *Zoe! The wench has a name!* “-has a son,” Bryan said.

“How old is he?” Cassie said. “What’s his name?”

“I’ll talk to you about this at home tonight,” Bryan said. “I really don’t have time to-”

“No, please,” Cassie said. “Tell me now.”

“All right,” Bryan said. “He’s your age. His name is Aaron. Look, I have to get going. We’ll talk about this more tonight.”

The phone fell from Cassie’s hand struck the floor, and though it had fallen, her hand remained beside her face. She stared ahead, at the corridor wall. It was some time before she regained her faculties.

Her phone was bleeping. Her father had hung up. Cassie picked it up, turned, and headed back toward the classroom. She was about to push on the door when she stopped, looking through the glass at Aaron sat on the front row.

Mrs. Rae was saying something to the class, who were already busy packing up their things. Cassie’s life suddenly felt like this, like she was an observer, peering in from the outside. She needed to retake control. She girded herself and entered the classroom.

She picked up her notepad and pen and whispered in Aaron’s ear.

“Meet me on the playing field behind the music room,” she said. “And come alone.”

She blustered past Pete.

“What was all that about?” Pete said.

“I’m sure I don’t know,” Aaron said.

# 12

IT HAD OCCURRED to Aaron that Cassie had taken the revelation of his mother and her father dating rather well. Too well. And the fact that they were going to be stepbrother and sister, or at the very least eventually living under the same roof as if they were, had made him don several layers of extra clothing that morning for fear he was going to get hammered. He relaxed during chemistry when Cassie seemed unaffected by the news. But now Cassie had insisted on them meeting alone out in the quieter area of the school grounds, suggesting his fear of violence was perhaps not entirely unfounded.

He poked his head out of a door and looked down toward the corner of the music room that backed onto the playing field. Cassie was smoking a cigarette right under a No Smoking sign.

"What's up, sis?" Aaron said.

Cassie tossed her cigarette on the ground and stamped on it with her heel.

"Don't you ever call me that," she said. "I'm not your sister, and I never will be. How long have you known about our parents?"

"Since yesterday," Aaron said. "I didn't know your father even existed before then. Well, obviously I knew you had a father, but-"

"Well, that's very convenient," Cassie said, crossing her arms.

"Convenient how?" Aaron said.

"We get partnered up in chemistry," Cassie said. "And then this happens?"

"I didn't want to be with you any more than you wanted to be with me," Aaron said.

"And I suppose this ridiculous idea our parents have of getting together has nothing to do with you?" Cassie said.

"Of course it doesn't," Aaron said. "If you can get over yourself for one minute you'll realize I don't want you for a sister any more than you want me for a brother! My life's hard enough with you and Clint at school, never mind in my home life too."

Cassie looked Aaron over. She seemed convinced Aaron's anger was genuine.

"This cannot be allowed to happen," she said. "My reputation is at stake. No one is to know about this. This is between you and me. That's all."

"Believe me," Aaron said. "This is every bit as embarrassing for me as it is for you."

"Somehow I find that very hard to believe," Cassie said.

"It's true," Aaron said.

"What do you have to be worried about?" Cassie said. "The worst you'll get is the rep that your stepsister is a total fox."

"You're so humble," Aaron said, folding his arms.

"See?" Cassie said. "The king of all dorks. What was all that 'sis' stuff?"

"I thought we might as well get used to the titles, if that's what we're going to end up being anyway," Aaron said.

"We can't let our parents do this to us," Cassie said. "I won't allow it."

"Sounds like they've already made up their minds to me," Aaron said. "Anyway, what do you plan on doing, exactly?"

"I don't know," Cassie said. "But I'm going to do something. Are you in if we come up with a plan?"

Aaron was silent a moment, running the issue over in his mind.

"Yes," he said. "I'm in."

"Good," Cassie said. She pinched her lips together between her index fingers. "Let's think this through. We've got a dinner to go to tonight, did you know?"

"Mom might have mentioned it," Aaron said. "So?"

“So, we’re going to make sure it doesn’t go well, capiche?” Cassie said.

“How?” Aaron said.

“We’re going to make sure we don’t get on well with each other’s parents,” Cassie said. “I’ll tell you everything my dad hates, and you’ll tell me everything your mom hates. That way, they won’t be able to stand us, and they’ll split up.”

Aaron thought for a moment.

“That’s actually not a bad plan,” he said.

“Of course it’s a good plan,” Cassie said. “It’s one of mine. Now, listen. The number one thing my father hates is this…”

# 13

AARON DIDN'T THINK people his mother's age could *have* boyfriends. They were either single or married. But yet here he was, appraising himself in the mirror, checking his tie was on straight to meet him.

It was important to make a good first impression, his mother had told him. She was obviously nervous. Aaron was too, though for another reason. He knew more about Bryan Angelo than he cared to. He only knew the things that made him angry and annoyed – Cassie refused to tell him what kind of person he was in a positive light – but in knowing his dislikes, Aaron could piece together the kind of man Bryan was. He was quick and to the point, not the type to waste time. He was someone of influence and expected to be listened to. Aaron let out a sigh. Despite his best efforts he already liked Bryan. But he couldn't let that get in the way, not tonight.

Aaron descended the stairs and saw his mother. He froze, his breath taken away. She wore a long black cocktail dress with a million sparkles. She had her hair done up, her makeup sparse save for around her eyes, which had a complex arty design. She looked more beautiful than he had ever seen her before.

"Well?" Zoe said. "What do you think?"

"You look good," Aaron said.

"Only good?" Zoe said.

"You look amazing," Aaron said, descending the final few stairs.

"That's more like it," Zoe said with a smile.

She bent down to straighten his tie.

"You look very handsome too," she said.

"I know," Aaron said with a shrug.

A car pulled up outside their home.

"That'll be Bryan," Zoe said. "I want you to be relaxed and your usual lovely self. Okay?"

"Okay," Aaron said.

Though for him, it was impossible to be one without the other.

They approached the door. Zoe let out a deep breath.

"Aren't you going to take my arm?" she said.

Aaron linked his elbow through hers. The doorbell rang. Aaron had never feared the sound so much in his life.

"Are you ready?" he said.

Zoe nodded.

"Are you?" she said.

*No*. But what choice did he have?

Aaron opened the door. A man stood on their front step with a bouquet of flowers. Aaron cast an eye over him. He had a square face, with wavy blond hair that hung limply across his forehead. He was tall and handsome.

"You look incredible," Bryan said to Zoe.

He took her hand and kissed her on the cheek. It was weird for Aaron, seeing that.

"Thank you," Zoe said. "You don't look so bad yourself."

Then Bryan turned to Aaron. Aaron didn't know anything about suits, but even he could tell it was one of quality, maybe even tailored. It made his own look cheap by comparison.

Bryan's eyes swept over him.

"You're going to have to give me the name of your tailor," he said.

Aaron smiled. He knew he wasn't supposed to, but he couldn't help himself.

"You must be Aaron," Bryan said, extending his hand. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

He shook the hand. It was warm and soft, not the hands of his father which were always rough and worn. He was suddenly swept with emotion, and he let go of the hand. *Judas.*

"This is my daughter, Cassie," Bryan said, sweeping his arm. "I believe you both already know each other from school."

"Vaguely," Cassie said.

She too wore a beautiful dress. Hers was made of a pink/purple cloth that highlighted her figure.

"It's a pleasure to meet you too," Zoe said to Cassie. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you," Cassie said without emotion. She did not return the compliment.

Then Bryan and Zoe looked at Aaron, waiting for him to do something. Zoe glanced at her arm he was holding. Aaron stepped forward and extended it to Bryan. It was a simple movement, but it conjured up all kinds of deep emotions in Aaron, chief among them a sense of loss.

"Thank you," Bryan said.

Bryan and Zoe approached the stretch limousine parked in front of their house. Cassie joined Aaron, following behind their parents.

"My father's a fan of tradition," Cassie said. "I think all this stuff is over the top."

Aaron shrugged. He actually quite liked it.

The limousine was at odds with the slightly battered vehicles parked along the street in either direction. Aaron thought he caught sight of more than one set of curtains twitching.

A pretty woman in her mid-twenties, wearing a smart jacket and chauffeur's hat, opened the car door for them.

"Rosetta," Zoe said, nodding to her.

"Miss Tate," Rosetta replied.

Bryan broke his connection with Zoe and helped guide her into the car. He waited, and helped Cassie in next. Then he nodded to Aaron.

"After you," Bryan said.

"Age before beauty," Aaron said.

Bryan smiled and got into the car. Aaron followed. Rosetta closed the door behind them, and then moved around to the driver's side door.

Aaron was rather enjoying being waited on hand and foot. He broke into a broad grin. He caught the glare Cassie aimed at him, and stifled his smile. He had to remember why he was there. He and Cassie were going to sabotage the evening. His insides twisted like a pit of snakes.

# 14

THE FAÇADE of La Luna was beautiful, reminiscent of those old restaurants in small Italian country villages, the heart and center of the community. An archway trellis was covered with green vines. Heavy ripe zucchini hung overhead. A uniformed chef came out with a stepladder and chopped off a few, descended the squeaky stepladder, and returned to the kitchen.

Bryan shook hands with a few people he recognized as the family was shown to a private table. The waiter removed the 'reserved' sign and gestured for them to sit. They took their seats. Bryan helped push Zoe's seat under her. Aaron was about to do the same for Cassie before she glowered at him. He sat down.

They picked up their menus.

"Well," Bryan said, "what looks good?"

Bryan's phone buzzed, the familiar ringtone coming from his pocket.

"Apologies," he said.

He reached into his pocket and took it out. He looked at the caller ID out the corner of his eye, and Cassie could see he desperately wanted to answer it. She almost smiled to herself, leaning back in her chair as if waiting for the fireworks show to kick off. Zoe was frowning, just as Aaron had said she would. Mealtimes were family time.

"I forgot to turn it off," he said.

"You can tell them you'll call them back after dinner," Zoe said.

"Okay," Bryan said.

He answered the phone.

"Hello?" he said. "Yes, sorry. I'm eating dinner at the moment. I'll call you back later. I don't care how important it is. Call back in a couple of hours."

He hung up and then turned his phone off. Zoe smiled at him and he smiled back.

The waiter reappeared.

"Would you like to order now?" he said.

"Yes," Bryan said. "Zoe, what would you like?"

"I'll have the vegetarian Bolognese, please," Zoe said.

"Cassie?" Bryan said. "What would you like?"

Cassie's eyes boggled. She had never ever seen him turn his phone off before.

Such was her shock that she had apparently forgotten the English language.

"Uh, uh, I'll, uh…" Cassie said.

"Not decided yet?" Bryan said.

"No," Cassie said. "I know what I want. It just all looks so good. I'll have the special Stromboli and Sicilian-style pizza."

"Very good," the waiter said, turning to Aaron.

"And a large beef calzone and agnolotti pasta, please," Cassie said.

"Woah," Bryan said. "Are you ordering for all of us?"

"No," Cassie said. "Just for me."

"Are you sure you can eat it all?" Bryan said.

"I'm starving," Cassie said.

"All right," Bryan said, nodding to the waiter. "Aaron?"

"Hm," Aaron said, peering at the menu.

"Why don't you have the Bolognese?" Zoe said. "That's your favorite."

"We had it the other night," Aaron said.

"How about the lasagna then?" Zoe said with a smile. "I hear it's delicious here. It's a signature dish."

“Hm,” Aaron said, still pouring over the menu.

“Would you like more time to decide?” Bryan said. “I’m sure the waiter has other things to be doing.”

“It’s perfectly fine, sir,” the waiter said, eyes glancing toward the kitchen doors.

“While Aaron’s still looking,” Bryan said. “I’ll have the eight ounce ribeye steak, please.”

“Yes, sir,” the waiter said, making a note. “And the young gentleman?”

Aaron sucked air in through his teeth.

“Tricky,” he said. “Very, very tricky.”

Cassie glanced at her father out the corner of her eye. He had begun to drum his fingers on the table.

Aaron redoubled his effort, burying his nose in the menu.

“I think I’ll have…” he said. “No, wait. I’ll have the ice cream and brownie.”

“That’s for dessert,” Zoe said. “What about your main?”

“I thought I already said?” Aaron said.

“No,” Bryan said. “Not yet.”

“Oh,” Aaron said. “Wait a minute, I’ll try to find it again.”

Bryan’s jaw muscles clenched tight. Aaron ran his finger over the menu items again. Finally, he said: “I’ll have the lasagna, please.”

The waiter collected their menus and headed away, with a slight glare directed at Aaron.

“Can I say, what a pleasure it is to have you both here,” Zoe said. “To finally put a face to all the stories is truly an honor.”

“I swear they’re not true,” Cassie said.

“He’s only told me all the good stuff, don’t worry,” Zoe said.

Bryan raised his glass, and all the others joined him.

“To a long and happy life together,” he said. “Filled with adventure.”

Bryan reached for Zoe’s hand, and took it, gently, and held it. Zoe stroked his fingers with her thumb. Cassie noticed. Her eyes weren’t the only ones fastened to them. Aaron turned his head to the side like someone tasting something distasteful, and then turned away, eyes glancing up and catching hers. Cassie gave an almost imperceptible nod.

*Showtime*.

Cassie’s cell phone rang. She took it out and immediately answered it.

“Hello?” she said. “No, I’m not doing anything. What’s up?”

“Cassie,” Bryan said, an undertone of annoyance in his voice. “Hang up. Now. We’re having dinner.”

Into her phone, Cassie said: “Hold on a minute.” She turned to Bryan. “What?”

“I said, speak to your friend later,” Bryan said. “We’re eating.”

“But we’re not eating yet,” Cassie said.

“We’re about to,” Bryan said.

“So?” Cassie said.

“So, hang up now,” Bryan said.

“All right, all right,” Cassie said. Then, into her phone: “Hello? Yeah, really sorry but I’ve got to go. No, I’m out now with some… friends. Yeah. I’ll chat to you as soon as it’s over. See you. Bye.”

Cassie could see the annoyance on Zoe’s face, which had become hard and expressionless. She sipped at her glass of water in a tight grip. Mealtimes were family time. *Ha!*

The waiter came with their meals and placed them each in front of the guests. Cassie’s meals sat around her in a wide arch.

“I don’t know where you’re going to put it all,” Zoe said. “You’re so thin.”

“I take after my mother,” Cassie said. “A fast metabolism.”

“What subjects do you like at school, Cassie?” Zoe said.

“I’m not really a very good student,” Cassie said.

“Your father told me you’re exceptional at art,” Zoe said.

Cassie shrugged.

“I can see if work will let me bring you one of these days, if you like,” Zoe said. “You’ll love our graphic design department.”

Cassie heaped more chicken onto her fork.

“What do you say, Cassie?” Bryan said.

“About what?” Cassie said.

“Zoe’s kind offer,” Bryan said.

“Oh,” Cassie said, blowing onto her meat. “Thanks.”

Zoe pushed a vegetarian meatball around on her plate.

“Can I ask you a question?” Cassie said. “Why did you order vegetarian Bolognese? You should either eat meat or not eat meat, not eat something that *looks* like meat.”

“Bolognese without the meatballs isn’t really Bolognese,” Zoe said. “Just because I don’t like the taste of meat doesn’t mean I should miss out on the experience.”

Cassie pursed her lips and drank some of her cherryade. She looked at Zoe over the edge of her glass.

“So, how did you two meet?” she said.

“Well,” Zoe said, flapping her napkin as if preparing to tell an exquisite story. “We met when your father asked for an appraisal on a piece of land he was thinking about acquisitioning. You see, there’s this process of digging for minerals called fracking. How you do it is to aim a high-power hose at the land and blast through it with high-pressure water…”

Cassie ate her meal, keeping her eyes on her food and never once looked up.

“Cass,” Bryan said. “You should pay attention to someone if you ask them a question and they’re polite enough to answer.”

“It’s all right,” Zoe said. “I’m sure fracking isn’t exactly what a teenager would like to talk about.”

“No, go on,” Cassie said. “I’m listening. I’ll give you my undivided attention.”

“Okay…” Zoe said. “Well, it’s been in all the newspapers lately that fracking is dangerous to the environment and that it can cause sinkholes and earthquakes and all kinds of things.”

Cassie kept her eyes on Zoe, nodding, and cut at her food, never letting her eyes drop to her plate. She stabbed at a slice of chicken with her fork, making a screeching sound. Then she raised it up in front of her face and aimed it at her mouth, but missed, and touched her cheek. She tried again, and missed, this time dabbing some of the gravy on her nose. Still, she kept her eyes firmly on Zoe, who by now had noticed what was happening.

“Uh, you have something on your face,” Zoe said.

“On my face?” Cassie said. “Where?”

“On your cheek,” Zoe said.

“On my cheek?” Cassie said, reaching over with the fork, and poking herself on the wrong cheek.

“Now you have it on both cheeks,” Zoe said.

“Really?” Cassie said. “It’s hard to see without being able to move my eyes.”

“Cassie,” Bryan said. “How old are you? Four?”

Cassie smiled and wiped the sauce off her face.

“I’m just playing,” she said.

“You’re too old to be playing with your food,” Bryan said. “Sorry, Zoe. Why don’t you carry on with what you were saying.”

“No, it’s okay,” Zoe said, pointedly not looking at Cassie.

Bryan glared at Cassie, who had a small smile.

“How about you, Aaron?” Bryan said. “Do you have any favorite subjects at school?”

“History and biology,” Aaron said.

“Ah, a history buff, ay?” Bryan said. “What are you studying at the moment?”

“The civil war,” Aaron said.

“One of our key moments in our history,” Bryan said.

“And our bloodiest,” Aaron said. “Did you know an estimated seven hundred fifty thousand people died during that war? Back then it was about twenty percent of our whole population.”

“Freedom and development has its costs,” Bryan said.

“I’m not sure if there was much development,” Aaron said.

“What do you mean?” Bryan said. “We had to force ourselves out from under the yoke of King George III, to a king that had never visited our shores and never would. Why should we be beholden to anyone but ourselves?”

It was clearly a passionate subject for Bryan. Aaron didn’t bat an eyelid. He was too busy trying to recall the crazy comments he’d memorized from the web.

“I admit the Constitution was a big leap forward, but look at us today,” he said. “Capitalism has hijacked our society.”

“Capitalism leads society,” Bryan said.

“There’s a bigger rich/poor divide in America than many developing countries,” Aaron said. “How do you explain that except for capitalism? The rich get richer, the poor get poorer.”

“You’re a child,” Bryan said. “When you grow up and start working, I’ll happily have this discussion with you.”

Zoe laid her hand on Bryan’s arm. He pulled away, scratching his eyebrow with his thumb. He didn’t touch his food again.

Cassie put down her fork.

“I’m stuffed!” she said.

“Stuffed?” Bryan said. “You’ve hardly eaten anything.”

“It’s very filling,” Cassie said. “Help yourself, if you want.”

Zoe looked at the plates of wasted food and wrinkled her nose. Cassie smiled. It was a strike. Zoe, like Bryan, detested waste, for her with food in place of time. She was a great humanitarian, who sent a good percentage of her pay check each week to far flung nations populated by hungry people.

Aaron tossed his fork down on his plate too.

“I think I ordered the wrong thing,” he said.

Bryan rolled his eyes.

“What wrong thing?” Zoe said. “You like lasagna.”

“Yeah, but I wanted the Bolognese,” Aaron said.

“You said you didn’t want it because you had it the other day,” Zoe said.

“You can have some of mine, if you like,” Bryan said. “I know it’s not Bolognese, but if you close your eyes when you chew on the meat you can pretend it’s a meatball.”

“I’d rather have real Bolognese,” Aaron said.

“What are we supposed to do with your lasagna?” Zoe said.

“You can have some of Cassie’s food,” Bryan said. “She’s got plenty to share.”

“None of it’s Bolognese though…” Aaron said.

Cassie reached for her drink, but her hand was greasy with gravy and it slipped out of her grip, smashed on the table cloth and spilled over Zoe’s dress.

Zoe stood up, pushing her chair back, and bumped into a waiter, who was carrying a silver tray full of meals. He fell forward onto the table behind them, onto a pair of female diners, the food staining their expensive dresses. The women erupted into screams. The other diners arched their necks to see what was happening.

Bryan was up on his feet in an instant, apologizing to the female diners and offering to pay for their meal as well as to replace their dresses.

Cassie and Aaron, the only ones not standing, shared a smile and tucked into their meals.

# 15

THE ATMOSPHERE in the limousine was somewhat less jovial than the one on the way to the restaurant. Bryan opened his mouth several times to initiate a conversation, but was each time shot down by a frosty glance from Zoe.

The car pulled over to the side of the road and Zoe opened the door, not even waiting for Rosetta to come around the side.

"Good night!" Bryan said.

"Night," Zoe said, closing the door behind Aaron.

Bryan watched as Zoe and Aaron entered their house.

Rosetta returned to the driving seat. She lowered the partition window.

"Home, sir?" she said.

"Yes, Rosetta," Bryan said. "Home, please."

The partition window rose back up into place. Bryan looked at Cassie, who looked back.

"What?" Cassie said.

"Why?" Bryan said.

"Why what?" Cassie said.

"Why tonight?" Bryan said.

"Is this a guessing game?" Cassie said.

"Why did you order all those meals?" Bryan said.

"I was hungry," Cassie said.

"Why did you speak on the phone when you knew how important tonight was to me?" Bryan said. "You took this evening away from me. After you promised you would try your hardest."

"I did try my hardest," Cassie said.

"Yes, to ruin it," Bryan said.

"What do you mean?" Cassie said.

"You deliberately antagonized Zoe," Bryan said. "Making her defend her opinions on vegetarianism, wasting all that food."

"If you have an opinion you should be able to defend it," Cassie said, folding her arms.

"I was ashamed of you tonight," Bryan said.

"I was ashamed of you when you told me you wanted to replace Mom," Cassie said.

"You said it was a good thing I was seeing someone new," Bryan said. "And I'm not trying to replace your mother. She's been gone seven years. That's long enough to declare her officially dead."

"I suppose with Mom out of the way we can carry on with our lives in peace," Cassie said. "Once that particular problem has been solved."

"Is that how you honestly think of me?" Bryan said. "That I want to forget about your mother? We were married for seven years before she disappeared. I've spent a small fortune trying to locate her. But she's gone. Slipped off the face of the Earth. Tell me, should I be alone for the rest of my life? Waiting for someone who will not come back?"

"I didn't think you were alone," Cassie said. "You have me."

"What happens after you leave for college and I'm here by myself?" Bryan said. "What will I do then? I've found someone I really like. I just wanted you to get along with each other. You don't have to love each over. I just…"

He hung his head, resting his elbows on his knees. Cassie had never seen him look so defeated before.

"You're grounded," Bryan said.

Cassie couldn't believe her ears. She'd always been treated with respect before, as an individual. Bryan trusted her to be sensible, and she had never betrayed that trust. This was the first time he had ever treated her as a child.

"I'm *grounded*?" Cassie said. "What for?"

"You know what for," Bryan said.

Cassie pressed her lips together, turning white.

"I didn't do anything wrong!" she said. "You can't punish me just because tonight didn't go as well as you'd hoped."

"Give me your phone," Bryan said.

"Why?" Cassie said.

"You got a phone call from a friend," Bryan said. "I want to see which friend. I'm betting it wasn't a friend at all, but you making your cell ring yourself."

"No!" Cassie said.

"Give it to me," Bryan said.

"No," Cassie said. "It's my privacy."

"I'll check your phone records," Bryan said.

"You can't do that!" Cassie said.

"I pay your bill," Bryan said. "I assure you, I most certainly can."

Cassie's mouth hung open. She couldn't believe this was happening.

"If I'm wrong, I apologize," Bryan said. "But I won't stand for lies and deceit. Especially not from my own daughter."

"You can't do this!" Cassie said.

"I'm your father," Bryan said. "I can do whatever I want. You're going to live under my roof for the next four years. You'll do as I say until then. And if you want me to pay for your college education, you'll do what I say then too."

Her father had entered his business negotiation phase, and he was in a position of greater power. There was no getting through to him when he was like that.

They sat in silence until the limousine pulled to the side of the road.

"You forced me into tonight," Cassie said, eyes blurry with tears. "You *forced* me to do this. The next time you make plans for your life, make sure I'm not a part of them."

She threw the door open, making Rosetta start back, and then ran down the path to their house.

"Is she all right?" Rosetta said to Bryan.

"She'll be fine," Bryan said. "It's me I'm worried about."

He selected Zoe's number on his cell and called her. The phone rang and rang. Bryan began to think Zoe wasn't going to answer when the phone clicked.

"Bryan, I'm tired," Zoe said, her voice full of sorrow. "I need to go to sleep."

"I know," Bryan said. "But we need to talk."

"Not now," Zoe said.

"No, not now," Bryan said. "But soon. Are you free tomorrow?"

# 16

BRYAN SAT at the hotel bar. He had a glass of untouched whiskey before him. Zoe entered and he waved her over.

"Would you like anything?" Bryan said.

"No, thanks," Zoe said, unwinding her scarf.

"Windy today, isn't it?" Bryan said.

Zoe didn't reply. Bryan nodded to his cell and smiled.

"Phone's switched off," he said.

"Can we make this quick?" Zoe said. "I've got a busy day."

"Sure," Bryan said, a little hurt by Zoe's cold indifference. "I wanted to apologize for last night."

"There's nothing to apologize for," Zoe said.

"I think there is," Bryan said. "Cassie behaved very poorly toward you. I'm sorry for the way she treated you."

"Aaron was a little off too," Zoe said.

"But he wasn't as disruptive as Cassie," Bryan said. "I swear, I brought her up to have better manners than that. I only hope that it hasn't affected our relationship."

"You know what, I think I will have a drink," Zoe said.

"Have mine," Bryan said, sliding his whiskey over to her.

Zoe threw her head back, downing the whiskey in one go. She hissed through her teeth.

Then they sat in silence, Bryan looking at Zoe, Zoe looking away.

"This is what I was afraid of," Bryan said. "Things have changed between us. Now we know we can't become more, our relationship has become finite. We can't go back, can we?"

"C'est la vie," Zoe said.

"So the first attempt wasn't great, but so what?" Bryan said. "The next dinner date will be better."

"What next dinner date?" Zoe said.

"We're going to meet with the kids again, aren't we?" Bryan said.

"I can't see the point," Zoe said.

"So, that's it?" Bryan said. "Quitting after the first hurdle? I thought you had a lot more gumption than that."

"What do you want me to say?" Zoe said. "It was a nice idea, but it didn't work out."

"You know what they say," Bryan said. "If at first you don't succeed…"

"It's not going to work," Zoe said. "The next date couldn't be much worse."

"Exactly," Bryan said.

For the first time since she entered the hotel bar, Zoe smiled. It was small and lackluster, but it was still there.

"There she is," Bryan said. "The woman I want to be with. In business these kinds of problems always happen."

"This isn't business," Zoe said. "It's family."

"A business can do everything we can," Bryan said. "This is just a rough patch, that's all. Things will get better and easier."

"But Cassie and Aaron aren't going to change," Zoe said. "Is it right to force them into this?"

"Maybe we've both sheltered them a bit," Bryan said. "It's what happens when you try to bring up a child in a single parent family. You try to take on the responsibilities of both parents. It's tough."

"I'm a stranger threatening to take Cassie's father away," Zoe said.

“But you’re not taking me away from her,” Bryan said.

“No, but she thinks that way,” Zoe said.

“How’s Aaron?” Bryan said.

“Aaron’s fine,” Zoe said.

“But he’s still clearly not thrilled about having me in his life,” Bryan said.

“Who would be?” Zoe said.

Bryan smiled, enjoying the brief moment of levity.

“Thanks,” he said. “It was the first time we all met. Things can only get better from here on out.”

“I hope so,” Zoe said. “I don’t much relish the idea of living tonight over and over again every day.”

“So, you’re open to trying again?” Bryan said.

Zoe thought for a long moment.

“Yes,” she said. “But I don’t want to just go on a date next time.”

“What then?” Bryan said.

“I don’t know,” Zoe said. “I haven’t had time to think about it. At least last night was a memorable evening.”

“It was certainly that,” Bryan said.

“I’m sure in a few years we will look back on this and laugh,” Zoe said. “It’s just not happening right now.”

Bryan’s eyes twinkled with mischief.

“Did you see the look on the two female diners’ faces?” he said, grinning broadly.

Zoe covered her mouth with her hand and giggled.

“They looked like the world was going to come to an end!” Bryan said.

“To them, it probably was,” Zoe said.

“Maybe we could go to the batting cages on our next dinner date,” Bryan said. “Work out some of our aggression.”

Zoe shook her head.

“We need something where we can spend more time together,” she said.

“We can’t think of it now,” Bryan said. “We need something to help stimulate our little grey cells.”

“What do you suggest we do?” Zoe said.

Bryan raised two fingers. Pinched between them was a key card with a number printed on it.

“Make up sex is some of the best sex there is,” he said.

Zoe took the key.

“Give me ten minutes,” she said.

“You’ve got five,” Bryan said. “I’ll never be able to wait ten.”

# 17

BRYAN LAY in bed with the sheet twisted around his waist. He blew out a circle of smoke from his cigarette and sighed with content.

"Smoking's bad for you, you know," Zoe said.

"Really?" Bryan said.

"There were a few adverts about it a while ago," Zoe said.

"I must have missed them," Bryan said, taking another drag. "It helps me to think."

He offered it to Zoe. She gave him a flat stare.

"If you think I'd ever do that you mustn't know me very well," she said.

"I can always hope," Bryan said. "It's nice to unwind."

"I thought that's what we just did," Zoe said.

"True," Bryan said. "This is more a case of relaxing after all the effort."

"What effort?" Zoe said. "I did most of the work."

"I beg to differ," Bryan said.

"Beg all you want," Zoe said.

Bryan stubbed out the cigarette.

"I think I came up with what we should all do next time," Zoe said.

"Go on," Bryan said.

"We should all go on a trip together," Zoe said.

"What kind of trip?" Bryan said.

"Something with no distractions," Zoe said. "We need to spend more quality time together, get to know each other. *Really* get to know each other."

"Cassie has always wanted to go to Italy," Bryan said. "We could go there."

"It's too far," Zoe said. "In case something like the dinner date goes wrong, I want to be able to return home quickly."

"A domestic trip, then," Bryan said. "Where?"

"Out in the countryside maybe," Zoe said. "Camping."

Bryan laughed.

"What's so funny?" Zoe said.

"We could go anywhere, do anything, and you want to go camping?" Bryan said.

"We'll have stuff to do together," Zoe said. "Collect firewood, find food, rafting, maybe. All good experiences for building relationships."

"I can just imagine the expression on Cassie's face when I tell her we're going camping," Bryan said.

"Do you think you'll be able to convince her to go?" Zoe said.

"If I hold her allowance to ransom?" Bryan said. "In a heartbeat."

Bryan trailed a finger around Zoe's chin.

"Spending time together is probably a good idea," he said. "But trying to get Cass to leave the city is like getting a turtle to give up its shell."

"We need to get the kids away from their normal environment," Zoe said. "If we can get them away from here and spend lots of time together, we'll get to know each other better and like one another."

"Do you think it'll work?" Bryan said.

"Who knows?" Zoe said. "We can't give up at the first hurdle."

"I wouldn't dream of giving up," Bryan said, kissing Zoe on the forehead.

Then he smacked his head with the palm of his hand.

"Damn!" he said.

“What?” Zoe said.

“I just remembered I’ve got the new fracking installation to take care of,” Bryan said.

“We can go afterwards,” Zoe said.

“I’ve got a series of business trips after that,” Bryan said. “I won’t have much more than a day free.”

“Can’t you put someone else in charge of the fracking site?” Zoe said.

“I can, but there are so many decisions still to be made,” Bryan said. “I need to be there. Damn!”

Zoe shrugged.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” she said.

“No, I’m sure I can push it back,” Bryan said.

“I meant, we’ll come with you,” Zoe said.

“Come with me?” Bryan said.

“I’ve been to the site,” Zoe said. “There’s some woodland nearby. We can go camping around there. There’s plenty of forest. And if you need to head back to check on the equipment, you can.”

“You would let me do that?” Bryan said.

“Of course,” Zoe said. “But only one phone allowed – and only one emergency phone number can get through. All others must be blocked.”

“Fair enough,” Bryan said. “How long would we go for?”

“Let’s see,” Zoe said. “It’ll take about a week to finish setting up the fracking equipment… Why don’t we go for the whole week?”

“Isn’t that a bit long?” Bryan said.

“A week to forge life-long connections?” Zoe said. “I don’t think so.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever spent a week off work before,” Bryan said.

“This will be good practice for you,” Zoe said.

“What do you mean ‘practice’?” Bryan said.

“You don’t think you’re going to be at the grindstone all day when we live together, do you?” Zoe said.

“I never really thought about it,” Bryan said.

“The family that spends time together stays together,” Zoe said.

Bryan rolled over so he was on top of Zoe.

“I knew meeting you was the best thing that happened to me,” he said.

“Wrong,” Zoe said. “What’s *about* to happen to you is the best thing that ever happened to you.”

Zoe rolled Bryan back and slipped underneath the sheets.

# 18

BRYAN HADN'T BEEN behind the wheel of a car in so long he couldn't remember how to drive, so Zoe became the designated driver. Bryan had suggested Rosetta take them in the limousine as she had to go to the fracking site anyway, but Zoe pointed out the ludicrous idea of them turning up to go camping in a chauffeur-driven car.

"Rosetta could bring you your silk slippers and newspaper to you in the mornings too," Zoe said.

"It was just an idea," Bryan grumbled.

And so Bryan became their navigator.

"I have to warn you," Bryan said. "I'm not the best navigator in the world. We'll probably end up in the middle of nowhere."

"That's lucky," Zoe said. "That's exactly where we want to go."

By the time Cassie was finished packing, her room was empty. She liked to plan for the worst, and judging by the amount of luggage she had, she had planned for the end of the world. When Zoe's battered Volvo pulled up to the curb outside their home, it became abundantly clear that Cassie's luggage was not going to fit inside it.

"You need to pack only what you're comfortable carrying," Zoe told her. "There's going to be no one there to help you carry this stuff. I don't know about you, but I'd much rather leave stuff at home knowing I will come back to it than take it with me and have to leave it in the forest somewhere."

Cassie looked beseechingly at her father, but he was nodding his head in agreement.

"You've got ten minutes," Zoe said.

Cassie clenched her teeth tight and began dragging the trunks back toward the house to repack.

"Do you think she'll need help?" Zoe said to Bryan.

"Let her do it," Bryan said. "This'll be a good experience for her."

Cassie was back twenty minutes later – a message to Zoe she would not be so easily bullied. Cassie dumped her backpack into the boot of the car and got in the back. She folded her arms and glared out of her window.

"Okay!" Zoe said. "Here we go!"

The Volvo's engine roared, struggling with the weight, and then began to pick up speed.

Aaron was fiddling with a piece of string, tying it in knots, shaking his head, and then unpicking it and tying it again.

"What are you doing?" Cassie said.

"I'm practicing my knots," Aaron said.

"Your knots?" Cassie said. "What do you mean?"

"We're going camping," Aaron said.

"Don't remind me," Cassie said.

"So I'm practicing my knots," Aaron said.

He wore a dark green uniform with a gold insignia on the arm.

"You're in the scouts?" Cassie said. "What am I talking about? Of *course* you're in the scouts. This camping trip this was your idea, wasn't it?"

"No," Aaron said. "I go camping with my scout group. Why would I want to go with you?"

It was a fair question, and one Cassie didn't have an answer for, but she wasn't going to be so easily appeased. She rolled her eyes and turned to look back out the window.

Civilization slipped through her fingers. The world turned the hideous shade of green leaves in full bloom. Birds flapped through the air like miniature bombers. People had the gall to wear

smiles openly in the street. There was a general feeling of content in the air.

"I want to go home," Cassie said.

"We'll be home soon enough," Bryan said. "But first we're going to enjoy ourselves with a life-changing experience."

"Can't wait," Cassie said.

Zoe pulled her Volvo into a parking lot before a row of shops.

"Okay," Bryan said. "This is going to be our last stop before we get to the forest. If there's anything you need, make sure to get it now. Aaron, do you need anything?"

"No, thanks," Aaron said, not taking his eyes off his length of string, now encumbered with various knots.

"Cassie?" Bryan said.

"Yes," Cassie said. "I need a few things."

"Make sure not to buy too much," Bryan said.

"I won't," Cassie said. "Hey, Aaron. Come give me a hand."

Aaron looked from Cassie to Zoe and back again. He didn't trust the look on her face. Cassie nodded toward the shops. Aaron sighed and tucked his length of string in his pocket and got out of the car.

Zoe locked the doors and lifted the handle, checking it.

"Be back in twenty minutes," she said. "And don't leave the shops or the car park area."

She and Bryan headed away.

"Follow me," Cassie said to Aaron.

She led him across the car park toward a DIY shop.

"You want to buy some tools?" Aaron said. "I don't think we need any. We've got everything we need."

"Not everything," Cassie said.

She took a piece of paper out of her pocket. On it was a long list of items that she had made the night before. As they made their way around the shop, Cassie ticked off the items on her list. So far she had placed a ball of string, a pipette, and a box of matches in the basket Aaron carried.

"What are you planning on doing with all this stuff?" Aaron said.

Cassie's smile had the appearance of a sneer.

"What are you up to?" Aaron said.

"We're going to finish what we started that night in the restaurant," Cassie said.

"Our meal?" Aaron said.

"No, not our meal," Cassie said. "Breaking up our parents."

"Oh no," Aaron said, shaking his head and stepping back. "That's over. We tried, and we failed. Now we're all stuck together on this trip."

"This time it will work," Cassie said. "We'll make sure we have such a terrible time that they'll have no choice but to break up. They'll hate us, and each other."

"No," Aaron said. "You can do it if you want, but I want no part in it."

"Aaron," Cassie said. "You're already a part of it."

"Then I'll tell our parents what you're planning," Aaron said.

"No you won't," Cassie said.

"You want to bet?" Aaron said, turning around.

"Wait!" Cassie said. "You're not seriously thinking of backing out now?"

"I don't think we should have done this in the first place," Aaron said. "Let nature run its course. Your dad seems like a nice guy. They might even be good for each other."

"Back out now and I'll tell them it was your idea to sabotage the dinner date," Cassie said. "Think how disappointed your mom will be."

"Your dad will be disappointed too," Aaron said.

“He’s already disappointed in me,” Cassie said. “A little bit more won’t make any difference. Besides, do you honestly want me to be your sister?”

“God no,” Aaron said.

“I can assure you, I don’t want you to be my brother,” Cassie said. “We’d be doing our parents a favor by showing them that we should not be a family. I don’t want to be related to you.”

“Ditto,” Aaron said.

“Why do you speak like that?” Cassie said. “Did you swallow a dictionary or something?”

“Sorry, I’ll try to use easier words,” Aaron said.

“God help me. I just can’t have you as a” -she cast about, checking no one could hear her- “brother. It’s nothing personal. You’re just in all the wrong groups, have no friends, and no rep whatsoever.”

“I don’t see how I could take any of that personally,” Aaron said.

“Can you imagine the knock my rep would take?” Cassie said. “I might never recover from something like this.”

“That’s your problem,” Aaron said. “You’re obsessed with yourself, thinking all these things are important, but they’re not. You’ve spent so much time trying to not look like me you’ve become one of your idiot friends.”

They glared at one another. Aaron’s expression faltered first.

“Fine,” Aaron said. “But if we do this, what’s in it for me? Why should I get involved?”

Cassie blinked at him.

“What do you mean?” she said. “Them not getting together is best for both of us.”

“As you said, imagine what this would do for my rep if I became Cassie Angelo’s stepbrother,” Aaron said. “I should be overjoyed with this.”

Cassie looked horrified. Then her eyebrows drew down into a fearsome scowl.

“You don’t want to be playing this game,” she said.

“I’ve shown you my hand,” Aaron said. “What have you got?”

Cassie hesitated.

“What do you want?” she said.

“I want Clint and his idiots to stay away from me and my friend,” Aaron said.

“I can’t control Clint,” Cassie said.

Aaron turned around.

“Then you’re on your own,” he said.

Cassie ground her teeth.

“What if I threatened to get Clint to pay you *more* attention?” she said.

“Then not only would I not help you, I would do everything in my power to encourage our parents, and undo anything you attempted,” Aaron said. He grinned, loving the power reversal. “Including your plan on this camping trip.”

Cassie turned pale. She growled, balled her hands into fists as if she was going to strike him, and then screamed, stamping her foot, attracting the glances of other shoppers.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll do my best.”

Surprised at finding his demands met, Aaron fired off another one.

“And one more thing,” he said.

“What?” Cassie said with dread.

“My friend Pete has a crush on you,” Aaron said. “It would mean the world to him if you went on a date with him.”

“You must have sand for brains,” Cassie said. “I already have a boyfriend.”

“He won’t be your boyfriend,” Aaron said. “Just one date.”

“I wouldn’t go on a date with him if he was the last guy on Earth!” Cassie said. “Do you know what that would do to my-?”

“Your reputation?” Aaron said, rolling his eyes. “You’ve said that.”

“I might as well have a funeral for it now,” Cassie said.

“Then no deal,” Aaron said.

Cassie let out another scream.

“Fine,” she said through gritted teeth. “One date – out of town. *After* our parents split up.”

“How do I know you’ll keep your word?” Aaron said.

“Oh, I’ll keep my word,” Cassie said. “You just make sure to keep yours.”

If her words contained any more anger, she would have breathed fire.

“I’ll take your word,” Aaron said. “So, what’s your plan?”

“I’ll fill you in as we shop,” Cassie said.

They made a stop at the supermarket and pet shop as Cassie revealed her plan. It was simple, but could be very effective. They carried their bags back to the car.

At seeing their shopping bags, Bryan said: “We’re only going for a few days! What have you got in there?”

“You can never be over prepared,” Cassie said. “You taught me that.”

“Good advice,” Bryan said. “Just so long as you know it’s going to be your burden to bear.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” Cassie mumbled under her breath.

# 19

THE TREES became thicker the deeper into the forest they went. They blocked out the sunlight and made it feel cold. Zoe slowed down once to let a pair of deer cross the road, and then continued on until they had to stop again at a flooded stream. She reversed back up the incline, hit the accelerator hard, and flew through it, the water flying out to either side like the car had wings, splattering across the windscreen, and then exited up onto the other side.

"Woohoo!" Zoe said. "That was fun, huh?"

"Let's do it again!" Aaron said.

"In this car?" Bryan said. "We'd be lucky to make it through a second time."

"Maybe on the way back," Zoe said, guiding the Volvo around a long bend.

The road came to an end at a large clearing. The trees had been removed, leaving a stony field. Zoe pulled her Volvo alongside half a dozen equally malformed cars.

Rosetta stood talking to a bunch of men in hardhats and dirty overalls, all of them at least twice her size. She waved Bryan over.

"Excuse me a moment," Bryan said.

He reached for his backpack at his feet. As he pulled it toward himself the top flapped open. Inside was the slim case of a laptop, several spare batteries, and a portable internet link-up device.

"What's all this?" Zoe said. "I said you could bring a phone, not your whole office."

"This laptop is just for emergencies," Bryan said. "I might be able to solve issues just by sending a few emails rather than having to come all the way down here to deal with something. It means I can be with you and the kids more."

Zoe frowned. It was a good idea, but she had her reservations.

"All right," she said. "But it all stays switched off unless you get an emergency phone call from Rosetta."

"Fair enough," Bryan said.

He climbed out of the Volvo and approached Rosetta, who introduced him to the burly men. Bryan shook their hands and said something that made them all laugh. Bryan had a way with people. *Maybe with me too*, Zoe thought. It was an unwelcome idea.

"And I thought I was a workaholic," Zoe said.

"Welcome to my world," Cassie said with a wry smile.

Zoe looked toward Bryan with a look of concern.

# 20

"COME ON, THEN," Cassie said. "Let's go!"

Bryan was surprised at Cassie's excitement to get going. If he'd been a suspicious man he would have deduced something was afoot. He might have even noticed the mysterious bulge in Cassie's backpack and the guilty expression on Aaron's face.

Nothing could have been further from the expression on Cassie's face when he'd informed her of the camping trip they would all be undertaking. Her eyes had been as wide as saucers, her mouth hanging open, her face stretched out like a terrible creature from a deep dark lagoon.

"I'm not going!" she screamed. "I'm not! I refuse! You'll never get me to go! You won't!"

"You will if you want to continue getting your allowance," Bryan said.

Cassie stared at him like he'd just turned into the devil.

"You wouldn't!" she said.

"I would," Bryan said. "Just try me. Pack your things. We're heading away this Saturday."

Now, he hardly recognized her. She and Aaron whispered to one another, huddled over and chatting.

"Hey," Bryan said to Zoe, raising his eyebrows and nodding in the direction of the kids. "Looks like your plan is working."

Zoe smiled.

"Nothing like a common cause to bring people together," she said. "All we have to do now is make them like *us*."

"How could anyone not like you?" Bryan said, pulling her close.

"Thank you," Zoe said. "But I'm sure not everyone feels the same way."

"That's their loss," Bryan said, taking Zoe's hand.

There were no paths through the forest. It made them feel like they were the first people to have entered its green clutches. Squirrels and pheasants took flight from the thick foliage, hooting when they came too close.

*Ting tong ting tong ting tong ting tong!*

A metallic sound, alien in the natural environment, disrupted the peaceful setting.

"What's that?" Zoe said.

"It's my laptop," Bryan said. "I must have set the alarm. Sorry. Give me a minute and I'll turn it off."

He unshouldered his bag and turned the alarm off.

"Sorry," Bryan said.

"That's all right," Zoe said.

Bryan put the laptop back in his backpack. They continued on through the woods on their gentle journey.

*Ting tong ting tong ting tong ting tong!* This time from Bryan's pocket.

Zoe sighed in an irritated tone through her nose.

"I don't know why they keep going off," Bryan said. "I don't remember setting any alarms."

He reached into his pocket and took out his smartphone. He turned the alarm off.

"We're here to get away from the city," Zoe said.

"I know, I know," Bryan said. "It should be okay now."

But Bryan could sense the waves of irritation coming off Zoe. She focused on the woodland before them. *This was going to be a long trip.*

# 21

"WAIT A SECOND," Zoe said, unshouldering her backpack. "I need to take a picture of this. Isn't it incredible?"

The scene was of blue mountains, misty and lost to distance. An eagle soared above them, calling out with its powerful *scree!* The sky was blue and there wasn't a cloud to be seen.

"Aaron, come look at this," Zoe said.

"You keep them distracted," Cassie whispered to Aaron. "I'll put rocks in their backpacks and laxative in their water."

Aaron approached Zoe and Bryan.

"Where's Cass?" Bryan asked.

"She just went to the toilet," Aaron said. "She'll be here in a minute. Wow. It really is beautiful, isn't it?"

"It sure is," Zoe said, taking a few more pictures.

"I'd better go check on Cass," Bryan said. "Knowing her she'll have stepped on the only snake around here."

Aaron glanced at the shallow rise that hid Cassie from view.

"Mom, why not take a picture of me and Bryan?" he said. "For the photo album."

Zoe and Bryan exchanged a smile of satisfaction. Their plan was working.

"Sure," Zoe said. "Come stand over here."

Bryan and Aaron stood on a ledge that looked out on the canopy of treetops below. Bryan wrapped his arm around Aaron's shoulders.

"Say 'Cheese!'," Zoe said.

"Cheese," Bryan and Aaron said.

Zoe took a picture.

"That's a keeper," she said.

Cassie came over the rise, brushing the dirt off her hands.

"Cass," Bryan said. "Come look at this view."

Cassie flicked her eyes up at the incredible vista without really taking it in.

"Yeah, it's great," she said.

"You didn't even look at it," Bryan said.

Cassie sighed and looked at the scene of nature before her with exaggeration, letting her mouth hang open in mock bewilderment.

"Is that better?" she said.

"Much," Bryan said.

Bryan wrapped an arm around her, and Zoe did the same with Aaron. To anyone passing by they would have looked like the quintessential happy family. When they returned to their backpacks, Bryan and Zoe grunted under the weight.

"We should make sure not to stop too often otherwise I might never get started again," Bryan said.

Within ten minutes sweat was pouring down their faces.

"Can we stop a minute?" Bryan said. "I need to take a rest."

"You and me both," Zoe said.

"I haven't been trekking in a while," Bryan said. "Man, do I feel my age."

Bryan and Zoe squirted the last of the water from their bottles into their mouths.

"I'm going to go refill my water," Zoe said.

"I'll come with you," Bryan said. "Kids, can you wait here a minute?"

"Sure," Aaron said.

The moment Bryan and Zoe were gone, Aaron and Cassie leapt to their feet and ran to Bryan and Zoe's backpacks. They pulled the anti-mosquito spray from Bryan's side pocket and tucked in their own concoction. It had the same casing. Aaron tucked Bryan's spray in his pocket.

"Are you sure this'll work?" Aaron said.

"According to the internet," Cassie said. "Since when has the internet ever been wrong?"

"Did you put laxative in both their water bottles?" Aaron said. "Bryan looks fine."

"Dad had his bottle with him," Cassie said. "Don't worry, we'll get his later."

Zoe and Bryan re-emerged. Bryan waved his hand at a mosquito. He reached into his backpack side pocket and sprayed himself with the mosquito spray.

"We'd best crack on," Zoe said.

They grunted as they picked their backpacks up again. A mosquito buzzed around Bryan's face. He smacked his cheek, but missed it.

# 22

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, and Zoe was pale as a ghost, sweat running down her face. She put her hand to her stomach and frowned.

"I don't feel so hot," she said.

"Apparently I do," Bryan said, slapping his face. He had two dozen small red bumps on his face, neck and arms. "These damn mosquitos won't leave me alone."

Zoe didn't respond, keeping her hands on her stomach. Then her eyes widened. She unshouldered her bag and let it hit the ground.

"Be right back!" she said, disappearing into the foliage.

"What's wrong with her?" Bryan said.

"When you gotta go, you gotta go," Cassie said.

Bryan slapped away another mosquito. He took the spray out and doused himself with it.

"This stuff must be watered down or something," he said.

Zoe came through the hedge, her hair sticking up, her face drained of color.

"Better?" Bryan said.

"Yes," Zoe said. "Much."

She froze. Her eyes widened, and she pressed her hands to her stomach, turned, and ran back through the hedge.

"Of all the places to get ill," Bryan said, shaking his head.

He slapped his cheek again. He was beginning to get red hand shapes on both cheeks.

# 23

THE YOUNG DEER lay on the ground on its side, legs feebly kicking out, making a gasping *meh* noise. It was a beautiful creature, terrible to see it in such pain. Its haunches were wet with blood, black gashes where something had attacked it.

"We need to get it to a vet," Bryan said.

"It'll die before we get it there," Zoe said.

"So what do you suggest?" Bryan said.

Zoe took out her knife.

"I thought you were a fighter for animal rights?" Bryan said.

"I am," Zoe said. "It's in pain. It deserves the right to a painless death. I have to put it out of its misery. We can't let it suffer like this."

"Do you know how?" Bryan said.

"I think so," Zoe said. "It's a fairly simple procedure."

Zoe placed the blade over the deer's neck and then brought it across with a strong motion. The deer's legs kicked out, and its body became still. Blood seeped over the forest floor.

"Aaron," Zoe said. "In my bag you'll find a collapsible shovel. Get it and start digging a hole, please."

"Wait," Bryan said. "Shouldn't I carve it up?"

"Carve what up?" Zoe said.

"The deer," Bryan said. "There's a lot of good meat here."

"You're not serious?" Zoe said.

"Of course I am," Bryan said. "This is what we're here for, isn't it? To enjoy nature in all its varieties."

"Yes," Zoe said. "But not to eat everything."

"Seems a waste to leave it here," Bryan said.

"That's the beauty of nature," Zoe said. "There's rarely any waste. Something will come along and pick it up."

"But we got to it first," Bryan said. "We should eat it."

Zoe looked Bryan over, and then shrugged her shoulders.

"All right," she said. "If you're sure you can eat it. But you'll have to prepare it."

"You'll have to help me," Bryan said. "I'm not entirely sure how to do it."

"I'm sure Aaron can help you," Zoe said.

"Aaron," Bryan said, rubbing his hands together. "Fancy some deer steaks?"

"Sounds good," Aaron said.

"Great," Bryan said. "But, uh, have any idea how to do it?"

"First, you need to hang it up, and then cuts its belly open," Aaron said. "Get rid of the guts, and then skin it. Then you cut the meat off into whatever size you want, and then cook it over the fire. Or you can hang it out to dry. Make some jerky."

"How long does that usually take?" Bryan said.

"Depends on the thickness of the meat," Aaron said. "About two days, I guess. But as we're going to keep moving, you're probably better off leaving whatever you don't eat to one side. Something will eat it. Oh, and we can't eat it here. The blood will attract whatever animals are in these woods."

"Understood," Bryan said.

He began hesitantly, but then realized hesitancy was not the woodsman's friend. He hacked at the meat with greater aggression. The slop sound of the creature's entrails spilling on the ground made him dry retch. Bryan backed away from the smell and covered his nose with his hand. He

looked like he wasn't sure if a steak was worth all this bother. But he persevered, and together with Aaron, cut the meat from the deer's bones. He was not good at this, and there was lots of meat left on the bone that Zoe's ex-husband would no doubt have never allowed to remain, but they had more than enough for themselves to make steaks. Aaron wrapped them up in broad leaf packages.

"Nature will tidy up after us," Aaron said as they hit the road again.

"The scouts certainly are more thorough in teaching survival techniques these days," Bryan said. "In my day it was just all about leaf types."

"They didn't teach me this," Aaron said. "My father did."

"He was clearly a very knowledgeable man," Bryan said.

"He was the best," Aaron said.

"I'm sure he still is," Bryan said. "Your mother told me your theory that he might still be alive."

Aaron shrugged.

"There's no reason to think he's not," Bryan said. "But it's important to remember to live your life with the assumption he won't come back. Not that he won't. He could. But just in case."

"Thanks," Aaron said.

His tone was hard to read, but Bryan thought he saw a smile on his lips. *Boys are easier.*

# 24

ZOE, CASSIE AND AARON set up the tents and pegged them down, beside one another.

Zoe curled up her nose at the smell of the smoking meat over the fire. The fat hissed, sending up fresh plumes of flames. The fire provided a beautiful light to the night, where the fireflies had come out to play. Cassie joined her father.

Aaron sidled up to his mother.

“Bryan’s not much like Dad, is he?” Aaron said, keeping his voice low.

“No,” Zoe said. “But we’re all different.”

“Dad never had a cell phone with him when we went on camping trips,” Aaron said. “How come Bryan does?”

“Your father loved nature,” Zoe said with a shrug.

“Bryan doesn’t love nature?” Aaron said.

Zoe looked at Bryan, who sat poking at the meat like someone who would much rather be doing something else.

“Of course he does,” Zoe said. “He’s just… not as good at showing it, that’s all.”

“Get a plate,” Bryan said. “I think it’s done. Would you like some of this, Zoe?”

“I’m fine, thanks,” Zoe said, spooning cooked vegetables onto her plate.

“Aaron?” Bryan said.

“Yes, please,” Aaron said.

Bryan ladled a fleshy piece of leg onto a plate. Aaron’s eyes widened at the size of it. The grease dripped from their fingers and lips, but boy, did it taste good.

After they were finished eating, they all sighed with satisfaction and let the calmness of the night wash over them. They all suddenly felt tired and weary to their bones.

“I’m ready for bed,” Zoe said. “It’s been a long day.”

“I know what you mean,” Bryan said.

They cleared up and got ready for bed, brushing their teeth using water from their bottles.

“See you in the morning,” Zoe said to Cassie and Aaron. “Sleep well.”

“You too,” Aaron said.

They got into their respective tents and zipped up the front.

“End of day one,” Bryan said. “Going well so far?”

“Yes,” Zoe said. “I think so. With Cassie and Aaron always whispering and smiling at one another I don’t think we have to worry about them getting on.”

“But with us?” Bryan said.

“Maybe we can split up and do a few more activities between us,” Zoe said. “You with Aaron, me with Cassie.”

Bryan nodded.

“That makes sense,” he said. “Any idea what activities in particular?”

“No,” Zoe said. “Let’s play it loose and let what happens happen.”

They lay back and relaxed, settling into their sleeping bags, curling up close to share body heat.

“Cassie seems different to what you told me about her,” Zoe said.

“She can be difficult at times,” Bryan said.

“No, it’s not that,” Zoe said. “She reminds me of my sister, Jessica. She pretends to be strong and tough, but really she’s just covering herself. She doesn’t want anyone to know she’s really hurting. I don’t think she likes me much, though.”

“Jessica?” Bryan said.

“No, Cassie,” Zoe said.

“Of course she does,” Bryan said. “She just doesn’t show it, that’s all.”

“It’s just been you two for so long I don’t think she knows how to share you,” Zoe said.

“She’ll learn,” Bryan said.

“Maybe we should take this slower,” Zoe said.

“We’ve been seeing each other for nine months,” Bryan said. “How much slower can we go?”

“I just don’t want to mess up what we have again,” Zoe said.

“I understand,” Bryan said. “Neither do I.”

He kissed her on the lips.

“With George I always felt like I was the one with my feet firmly on the ground,” Zoe said. “He was the one whose head was up in the clouds somewhere. Sometimes I felt like I couldn’t go with him.”

Bryan nodded.

“I know what you mean,” he said. “Leslie could be the same. Sometimes it was hard just keeping up with her. She was an author, all imagination, no common sense. People like that are special, different. But it makes it hard for those they leave behind.”

Zoe smiled and snuggled in closer to Bryan, at home with someone who understood exactly how she felt.

# 25

THE FLAKES OF SNOW rushed into a frenzy, rising up into the sky before falling to the ground in slow motion, covering the idyllic scene in a thin layer. Aaron shook the snow globe again.

"Why do you keep doing that?" Cassie said.

Aaron looked up at her. He hadn't realized she'd been watching. His cheeks flushed red. He tucked the globe under his pillow.

"Freak," Cassie said. "Of all the things you could have brought with you, why did you bring that? It's full of water and really heavy."

"It was the last thing my father gave me before he left," Aaron said.

The admission came out of left field.

"I see," Cassie said. She couldn't think of anything else to say.

"He said that any time I feel sad or lonely or that I miss him, I should look at this globe and he'll be with me,'" Aaron said. "Then he looked into my eye and lied to me. He said, 'I'll be back before you graduate from second grade.'"

Cassie looked at the bulge under the pillow with interest.

"At least your father got to say he would be back," she said. "My mom just disappeared. We don't know where she went. She just disappeared."

Aaron looked at Cassie with new eyes.

"I didn't know that," he said.

"It's true," Cassie said. "So don't think you're the only one who lost a parent."

"I used to wait for him outside the house," Aaron said. "On the curb. For him to come back. He'll be back one day. I know it."

They were both silent a moment.

"Come on," Cassie said, getting up. "We don't want them to get much sleep tonight."

Cassie opened the zip slowly, one tooth at a time to reduce noise. She opened it just enough, like a cat flap, to be able to poke her head out. She looked at their parents' tent, which was quiet, save for Bryan's soft snoring.

Cassie climbed out of the tent armed with a loaf of bread. She tore it to pieces and tossed it on top of their parents' tent's roof. Then she opened a tin of dog food and upended it around the front of the tent. Then she headed out into the woods.

"What are you doing?" Aaron said, peering at the darkness around them. "We shouldn't be out here."

"One second," Cassie said. "Dad has a phobia of spiders. Maybe we can do something with that."

She moved to the undergrowth and lifted it like a blanket. Small creatures burst out, scattering in all directions. But Cassie had found what she was looking for. She picked up a large woodland spider. She held it in her hands and walked to their parents' tent. She unzipped the front by a few teeth and then put the spider inside, doing the door back up behind it.

"Sweet dreams," Cassie whispered.

# 26

BRYAN STARTED AWAKE, grunting as he did, accidentally kicking Zoe in the shin.

"Ngh?" Zoe said.

"Sorry," Bryan said. "I thought I heard something."

"It was probably just a dream," Zoe said, turning over. "Go back to sleep."

Bryan peered around at the inside of their tent, and then lay his head back down on his pillow. His eyes began to close.

*Snap*.

Bryan sat up.

"I definitely heard something," he said. "A snap, like something walking in the forest."

Zoe grunted but didn't get up.

Bryan listened to the world around him again, but nothing stirred. He lay back in his sleeping bag, his eyes moving left to right. He relaxed his eyes and began to close them, when he caught something out the corner of his eye. A spider, made large by the angle it descended down toward his face, landed on his cheek.

Bryan screamed, pressing his hands over his face to dislodge the spider. He ran at the door, knocking the whole tent to one side, and then grabbed the zip, tore it open, and leapt outside, sliding along the dirt on his back. Something slimy pressed against his arms. He felt at it. In the darkness it felt like blood, and when he looked again, a pair of mice were clinging to his arms. They beat a hasty retreat.

A flock of birds descended upon the tent roof and pecked at it, as if disliking a manmade object in their natural surroundings.

"The forest has gone mad!" Bryan screamed.

Zoe came out of the tent, and the birds flew away.

"Was this what made you go crazy?" Zoe said, holding out her hand.

Long spindly legs reached out through her fingers. Bryan shied back and gibbered. Zoe took the spider into the forest and let it go.

"You need to get a grip," Zoe said.

"But the birds…" Bryan said. "The mice…"

He cast his head about, but none of the creatures were present any longer.

"They were here," he said. "I swear."

"I believe you," Zoe said in a tone of voice that sounded like she didn't. "Now, let's go back to sleep."

Bryan stood up and dusted himself off, peering at the darkness and the sounds around him. He got back into the tent and listened closely to the night, eyes never still, muffling into his sleeping bag at every unexpected sound.

Cassie and Aaron smiled, letting the muffles wash over them like a lullaby.

# 27

"RISE AND SHINE!" Cassie said through their front tent flap. "The sun is up and it's a beautiful day!"

Bryan and Zoe grunted and sat up, and then fell back into their sleeping bags.

"Wakey wakey!" Aaron said, kicking the side of their tent.

Zoe and Bryan stretched and got to their feet. They both had dark circles around their eyes and moved like the living dead.

"Put the kettle on," Zoe said as she staggered toward the stream.

"What kettle?" Cassie said.

"A pot," Zoe said. "Heat a pot of water over the fire. I need coffee."

Bryan stood in place, his head hanging down as he fell asleep on his feet.

"Wakey wakey!" Cassie said to him.

Bryan started awake, but his eyes were already beginning to drift closed again.

After a wash, a cup of coffee and some breakfast, Bryan and Zoe were ready, at least in spirit, for the day. They packed their things and loaded their bags. They grunted at the weight of their backpacks – they could swear they were getting heavier – and then proceeded deeper into the forest.

"The fracking machinery will be kicking off any minute now," Bryan said, wiping the sleep from his eyes.

"Do you want to see it start for yourself?" Zoe said.

"No," Bryan said. "I've seen a million of these things. I don't need to see another one."

"But none of them have been yours before," Zoe said.

Bryan shrugged.

"There'll be plenty more to see in the future, hopefully," he said. "Let's keep going."

They headed farther and deeper into the forest. The rocks grew wide and as tall as Bryan. Streams flowed around them, carving sharp grooves around their edges.

*Boom!* It was a loud crack, like from a cannon.

The family stopped and turned to look in the direction of where it had come from. A flock of crows took flight and cawed with alarm. There was another *Boom!* And then another.

"It's the fracking machine," Bryan said. "It's started."

The crows passed overhead, away from the disturbing noises. Bryan was excited. He listened for more, but none came. His expression dropped when he realized he was not an intrinsic part of the process.

"Shall we have lunch?" Zoe said. "We'll cook something extra special to celebrate your success. How does that sound?"

"Sounds great," Bryan said, though he was still distracted.

"Anything in particular you'd like?" Zoe said.

"How about beef Wellington?" Bryan said with a smile.

"I can try…" Zoe said.

"You know what I would really like?" Bryan said. "Some beans on toast. My father used to make it for me every time I did well on a test at school. I still get cravings for it now and then at work."

"Beans on toast I can do," Zoe said.

They unshouldered their bags and sat them down on the ground, taking shelter in the shade. Zoe dug out a saucepan, a slightly squashed loaf of bread and two tins of baked beans. She heated the beans over a paraffin heater and asked Aaron to hold slices of bread over a second

heater until they were crispy brown. He sat the toast on some plastic plates and Zoe poured the bubbling beans over them.

“The first one’s ready,” Zoe said.

Bryan picked up a plate, sat on an upturned boulder and tucked into his meal.

“Mm,” he said. “That’s good.”

“Good,” Zoe said. “You’re the only millionaire I know who loves beans on toast.”

“How many millionaires do you know?” Bryan said.

“One or two,” Zoe said, poking out her tongue.

“You might be surprised,” Bryan said. “A lot of them will have grown up poor. They’ll all have a fond meal they remember from their youth.”

“How is it, Cass?” Zoe said.

Cassie shrugged. For once, she didn’t complain. It was a meal she had many times when she was young and associated happy moments with it. They sat in silence as they ate, letting nature offer a backing track to the moment.

Once they finished their lunch, Bryan took each of their plates and rinsed them in the stream. The water was crystal clear and sparkled in the afternoon sunlight. The air was fresh and clean and the city felt like it was a million miles away. That was until the alarm on Bryan’s laptop went off. Zoe sighed in exasperation.

“Sorry,” Bryan said. “I’ll turn it off.”

“I’ve got a better idea,” Zoe said. “Let’s throw it in the river.”

“The alarms keep going off,” Bryan said. “I don’t know why.”

“Will the office fail to operate if you’re not there?” Zoe said.

“We agreed I could leave my phone on in case of emergencies,” Bryan said.

“And you decided to bring your whole office with you instead,” Zoe said. “We’re all here, enjoying the natural scene and you’re off out there somewhere in electronics land. It looks like you’re trying to set up your own branch of Best Buy.”

Bryan’s face screwed up into a mask of anger.

“If I’d had any say in the location of where we’ll be going at least then I’d feel comfortable,” he said.

“You don’t feel comfortable out here in nature?” Zoe said.

Cassie and Aaron stood a discreet distance away, far enough for their parents to say whatever they needed to, but not so far they couldn’t enjoy the action going on before them.

“I do,” Bryan said, “but not under all these rules. I thought nature was supposed to be about freedom? So far as I can tell, there isn’t a whole lot of that.”

Zoe folded her arms.

“So what would you prefer?” she said. “For us all to go on by ourselves while you work in the corner? And turn that damn alarm off!”

Aaron had never heard his mother swear before, and it took him by surprise. He stepped forward to calm her, but Cassie blocked him.

“I’d prefer it if we didn’t have any rules,” Bryan said. “If we could relax while we’re away from the city.”

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to do,” Zoe said.

They folded their arms and looked away from one another. Cassie was struck by how similar they appeared in their moment of mutual anger. Zoe stormed off toward the fire, kicking dirt over it with venom.

Cassie leaned in close to Aaron.

“We’re getting close to the end now,” she whispered. “Dad can’t keep away from his devices much longer, not with the drilling machine starting. And I’ve just got the thing to push them over the edge.”

She rifled through her bag.

“What?” Aaron said.

Cassie extracted a pair of underwear.

“Panties?” Aaron said, feeling a bit embarrassed to look at them. “How are they going to help?”

“You’ll see,” Cassie said with a smile.

# 28

THEY WALKED along the stream for the rest of the afternoon. Bryan's attention was transfixed on the flowing water. Something popped up to the surface every few seconds, casting ripples out in concentric circles.

"Zoe," Bryan said. "Come here a minute! Do you see that? They're fish coming up for air. We're going to eat well tonight. Can you get me the fishing line and hook I've got in my backpack pocket?"

"Which side?" Zoe said.

"On the left," Bryan said.

Zoe opened the pocket and pulled out what was inside. There was a piece of cloth, with a fish hook and line inside it. Zoe handed them to Bryan, and was about to put the cloth back in the bag when her finger brushed against a piece of lace. She unfolded the cloth to find it was a pair of ladies underwear. They were silk with a pink love heart on the front.

"Bryan, what's this?" Zoe said.

"Hang on a sec," Bryan said. "I'll just set this line up and we'll be good to go."

"Bryan," Zoe said. "Look at me."

Her voice was stern, and Bryan knew better than to ignore it. Zoe held the panties up.

"What's this?" she said.

"Looks like a pair of underwear," Bryan said.

"I know what they are," Zoe said. "But what are they doing in your bag?"

"My bag?" Bryan said. "Are you sure they weren't in your bag?"

"They're not my underwear," Zoe said.

"Are you sure?" Bryan said.

"There are only two reasons why a man might have a pair of underwear like this in his backpack while on a camping trip," Zoe said. "Either he likes wearing women's underwear…"

"Next," Bryan said.

"Or they're underwear that another woman wears and you brought them to remind yourself of her," Zoe said.

"You're crazy," Bryan said. "I swear I have never seen those before in my life."

"Then how did they end up in your bag?" Zoe said.

"I don't know!" Bryan said. "Maybe they're a pair of my ex-wife's that got stuck in the washing machine or something. Or maybe she used the backpack way back when and forgot to take them out. I didn't put them in there. Why would I? I've got yours to look at if I like looking at underwear. And think about it. Would I really come on this camping trip, suggest ways for us to be together, and to take things more seriously, while secretly seeing someone else? How much free time do you think I have?"

Zoe frowned, letting Bryan's responses run through her mind. She shook her head.

"I suppose you're not stupid enough to let me discover something like this," she said.

"Thank you," Bryan said.

"Are they your ex-wife's?" Zoe said.

"I don't know," Bryan said. "How can I remember? But the rest of her clothes are in the house. I suppose they could be hers. You do believe me, don't you?"

Zoe looked into Bryan's big brown eyes.

"I might be crazy," she said. "But yes, I do."

Bryan reached out and took Zoe's hand. She looked at him and smiled, her anger seeping away.

"I would never do that to you," Bryan said. "You're everything to me."

Cassie and Aaron stood watching a short distance away.

“You’re right,” Aaron said. “They’re going to tear each other to pieces any moment.”

Cassie growled under her breath.

“What’s going on?” she said. “That was supposed to be the straw that broke the camel’s back. But look at them.”

Bryan and Zoe hugged one another tight.

“We need to try harder,” Cassie said. “We need to be ruthless.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t try to break them up,” Aaron said. “I mean, what’s the harm?”

“The harm is my reputation!” Cassie said. “And they won’t be happy together. We both know that.”

Cassie reached into a side pocket on her backpack and extracted a small packet.

“Desperate times call for desperate measures,” she said.

“What’s that?” Aaron said. “Another ultimate weapon?”

“To some, yes,” Cassie said.

“A packet of peanuts?” Aaron said. “I don’t understand how a few peanuts are supposed to do anything.”

“They wouldn’t,” Cassie said. “To anyone not allergic to them.”

“Wait…” Aaron said. “Your dad’s allergic to peanuts?”

“Just the sight of them brings him out in hot flushes,” Cassie said with a chuckle.

“But they won’t kill him,” Aaron said. Then more hesitantly: “Will they?”

“No,” Cassie said. “I mean, he might cough up a little blood, his throat might swell up until he can hardly breathe, but he’ll be all right.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t do this,” Aaron said. “Putting dog food and bread around their tent to attract animals is one thing, but this… I don’t know.”

“Don’t worry,” Cassie said. “If it gets too serious I know where father’s auto injector is.”

But Aaron did worry. He worried a lot.

# 29

BRYAN WAS DETERMINED to catch something on his make-shift fishing line, so they had to return to the same spot beside the stream by evening. Unfortunately, when they returned to his fishing spot the line floated on the water's surface. Bryan pulled it in to find it had snapped.

"Must have been a big one…" Bryan said, dejected.

"We've got other things to eat, don't worry," Zoe said.

The sun was beginning to draw a veil on the day, the birds roosting on the branches.

"Shall we stop here for the night?" Zoe said.

Everyone nodded agreement.

They pulled up on a small clearing of grass and began emptying their bags of the items they needed.

"How about sandwiches?" Zoe said. "We've got bread, tinned salt beef and some vegetables."

"Sounds good," Bryan said.

Zoe and Bryan headed over to the clear water stream and began to wash their hands. Cassie seized the opportunity and tore open the packet of peanuts.

"Are you sure about this?" Aaron said.

Cassie looked over at their parents chatting beside the stream. If she didn't make a move now she might not get another chance. She used the little key on the bottom of the tin and pulled the top off. She jammed the peanuts into the meat and then upended it onto a plate.

"Cassie, Aaron," Zoe said.

Cassie froze. Zoe had her hands on her hips and was glaring at them. How much had she seen?

"No food handling until you've washed up," Zoe said.

Cassie watched Zoe preparing their sandwiches, halfheartedly washing her hands, trying to figure out which pieces were more likely to have the peanuts in, like a roadside pea-under-the-cup trick, but she lost track in seconds. She thought she caught sight of a peanut sticking out of a slice of salt beef but it could have just been her imagination.

Zoe began cutting the salt beef into strips, from the top to the bottom. Some of the slices would have peanuts in, some wouldn't. It would be a matter of luck. But it would only take one to have an effect.

Zoe added some washed leaves and plants she'd picked from the forest, and boiled vegetables from the previous day. Bryan took a sandwich and held it on his lap as he got comfortable on the grassy knoll.

Cassie felt a tightening in her chest, a moment of panic at what she had done. She saw the same panic on Aaron's face, but to stop her father now would be to admit what they'd been up to. Before any other solution came to mind, her father bit into his sandwich. Cassie's panic only heightened, and she stared, frozen and useless, as her father chewed the sandwich with relish and swallowed. Cassie watched with grim determination, prepared to spring into action at a moment's notice.

"Cassie," Zoe said, holding a sandwich out for her.

Cassie took it, but kept watching her father.

Finally he was done, and seemed to suffer no ill effects. Cassie was secretly relieved but at the same time disappointed at the lack of response.

Her father looked at her, his eyes shifting to the untouched sandwich in her lap.

"Aren't you hungry?" he said.

She really wasn't.

“Wrap it up for later,” Bryan said. “Knowing you, you’ll be hungry the moment we get to bed.”

Cassie gave him a weak smile. How could she have done something so heinous to someone – perhaps even the only – person who loved her? She wrapped her sandwich up in a broad leaf plucked from a tree.

Bryan coughed, a dry wheezy thing like at the end of a cold.

“Let’s get the tents up,” he said, scratching his throat like he’d been bitten. “After last night, I’m still exhausted.”

He coughed again. And again and again. Zoe slapped him on the back.

“Are you okay?” she said. “You must have eaten too fast.”

Bryan looked up. His eyes bulged out of his head, bloodshot red in the corners. He pulled at the fabric of his shirt. He was gasping, his airway blocked.

“Oh my God!” Zoe said, slapping him on the back harder.

She thought he had something stuck in his throat, and was doing more harm than good by striking him the way she was. Zoe got behind him in the Heinrich maneuver and exerted pressure under his ribcage. Bryan tried to bat her away, but she wouldn’t let go.

Cassie was frozen, staring at the horror she herself had produced. Finally she snapped out of it.

“He’s not choking!” she screamed. “He’s allergic to nuts! He must have eaten some.”

Zoe laid Bryan down on the ground.

“What do we do?” she said. “He’s going to die!”

“He’s got some medicine in his bag,” Cassie said. “Aaron, can you get it? It’ll be in the front pocket.”

Zoe sat with Bryan’s head in her lap.

“I didn’t know he was allergic!” she said. “He never told me! But there shouldn’t have been anything in his sandwich to cause this! Maybe it was something from the forest I picked? Oh, Bryan. I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

Cassie’s heart went out to Zoe, but she reined it in. It didn’t help their cause to empathize. Aaron handed her the auto injector. She pulled the end off and pressed it to Bryan’s leg and held it there for ten seconds. Her father’s chest juddered and heaved and wheezed.

Cassie looked at the medicine in her hand.

“It’s not working!” she said.

She reached for another vial.

“No, wait!” Zoe said.

Bryan’s body began to move in smooth movements, and though his breath still rasped through his teeth, he was alive.

“We’ll need to set up camp,” Cassie said. “We’ll do it, if you keep an eye on Dad.”

“I will,” Zoe said. “Thank you.”

She ran her fingers through Bryan’s hair. He seemed calm now, his breaths relaxed.

“We have to tell them we did it,” Aaron said to Cassie as they erected their tents.

“No,” Cassie said. “We’ll never tell them. This is between you and me.”

“But-” Aaron said.

“No ‘but’,” Cassie said. “If I hear a word of it from anyone else, I’ll make your life a living hell.”

She couldn’t help looking over at the crumpled figure on Zoe’s lap. She had done this to him. She felt a pang of regret and then forced herself to turn away and concentrate on the tent.

# 30

IT WAS A FULL HOUR before Bryan's face returned to its normal size. He was still unconscious, his breaths low and deep. They sat around him as the darkness pressed in on all sides.

Bryan's eyes flickered open.

"Well, that wasn't very pleasant," he said.

"Bryan?" Zoe said.

She hugged him, the angle making it awkward.

"What happened to me?" Bryan said. "I thought I was a goner."

"You almost were," Zoe said. "You must have eaten a nut, or something like it."

"That'll explain it," Bryan said.

"I'm so sorry," Zoe said. "If I'd known I would never have picked random things in the woods."

"Now you know," Bryan said.

"If it wasn't for Cassie you'd be dead," Zoe said.

Bryan turned to Cassie.

"I knew I had you for a reason," he said with a wry smile.

Cassie smiled back, but it was weak and without mirth.

"Try to rest," Zoe said to Bryan.

"I can't," Bryan said. "I've got a camping trip to enjoy."

He forced himself up into a sitting position.

"You should rest," Zoe said. "We'll head home once you're all better again."

"Home?" Bryan said. "You don't think I almost died for nothing, do you?"

"Bryan…" Zoe said.

"I'm okay," Bryan said in a calm voice. "Really. It would do me some good to get moving."

"Get moving?" Zoe said. "It's nighttime. We'll be going to bed soon."

Bryan peered around at the dark, at the twinkling dots in the sky.

"I must have slept for a long time," he said, before lying back on his elbow. "Though I still feel a bit tired. I don't think I'd wake if even a dinosaur got the drop on us."

# 31

"IT'S NOT WORKING," Aaron said.

"I tried almost everything I could think of," Cassie said. "But none of it worked."

"What else did you have?" Aaron said.

"Fireworks," Cassie said. "I was going to put them under their tent."

Aaron levelled his gaze at Cassie.

"You're crazy," he said.

"Now you know why I decided not to do it," Cassie said.

"Looks like we're going to get stuck as stepbrother and sister," Aaron said.

"Never use those words," Cassie said. "Ever. But there must be something we can do to stop them…"

But for the life of her, she couldn't think what.

# 32

ZOE DIDN'T SLEEP well that night. She kept tossing and turning, her dreams centered on a man with his back to her, never turning around. He was on the phone, and she got the feeling he would forever be on it. There was a tapping noise, soft like a dog's nails on a hardwood floor. Her conscious mind tried to match it with the image before her, but couldn't.

Zoe started awake. She peered through puffy eyes at Bryan's sleeping bag. It lay flat and discarded. Zoe arched her neck to look at the corners of the tent, as if Bryan had curled up there somehow, but he wasn't there either.

She got to her knees, stretching her back and shoulders and arms. Her neck made popping sounds as she worked it around. She unzipped the front flap of her tent, poked her head out and peered around. Maybe he'd just gone to the toilet.

The sky was dark and the stars were bright, the moon casting a silver tint on the world. The kids' tent was silent too. But the tents' shadows were cast twice, once by the moon, and once from another source, a bright glow that faded and returned again from behind their tents.

Zoe edged between the two shelters. There was a soft tapping noise – the one from her dream. Only now, she recognized it for what it was long before she saw Bryan at the keyboard of his laptop, hammering away at the keys.

"What are you doing?" Zoe said in a low voice.

Bryan started, and turned to look back at her.

"You made me jump," he said. "I was just doing some work. I figured it was best to do it now as opposed to tomorrow when we would all be together."

"This trip is meant to be a family trip," Zoe said. "Not you working by yourself while the rest of us get closer."

"I know," Bryan said. "But I've got a company to run. And this fracking enterprise could have a huge impact for us."

"I understand that," Zoe said. "I helped work on it, remember. But if this is the way it'll be when we live together I'm not sure I want that kind of family."

"What do you mean?" Bryan said. "I'm a busy man. You knew that when you met me."

"I know," Zoe said. "But if you can't keep away from work for just a few days to spend time with your family…"

"All right, all right," Bryan said, turning the power off on his laptop. "It's off."

"I thought you were going to be more attentive than this," Zoe said. "I thought we had a deal? We were going to use this time for us and our kids to get to know each other."

"We are," Bryan said.

"And you weren't going to use your laptop or phone," Zoe said.

"There was a very important meeting today and I need to keep tabs on it," Bryan said

"Then why didn't you tell me?" Zoe said. "Instead of creeping off into the night like that?"

Bryan held up his hands, prepared to make excuses, and then thought better of it.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I should have told you. But if we weren't out in the sticks so much I could still get some work done."

"Don't blame me for this," Zoe said.

"Why not?" Bryan said. "You're the one who insisted on coming to the country. I wanted to go to a city."

"And a grand old time we would have had too," Zoe said. "We could have spent all our time separate and never get to know one another."

They were silent a moment.

“We’ve had nothing but bad luck ever since we came on this trip,” Zoe said. “You almost died, and have more bites than I thought it was possible for one man to get. I’ve lost my bodyweight in liquids, and keep getting angry at you for bringing your tech. I think we’re cursed. Come on, let’s get some sleep.”

They went back into their tent, not saying a word, neither of them happy with the situation.

*Ring ring!* Bryan’s phone went off.

“It’s Rosetta,” Bryan said.

Zoe ground her teeth, defeated by her own rules. Bryan answered the phone and turned from the campsite, becoming the unflinching figure in her dream.

Was she being too harsh on him? He had dedicated his life to his company, after all. But he wanted to have a family, and for her to be a part of it. A person needed to know when to work and when to relax. It was the only way to have a relationship worth anything.

“Don’t let him get to you.”

Cassie stood at Zoe’s shoulder. Zoe was so lost in her thoughts she hadn’t heard her approach.

“Who?” Zoe said.

“My father,” Cassie said. “He’s always been more interested in his work than anything else. It’s what comes with the territory.”

“This trip was supposed to be about us all getting to know each other better,” Zoe said.

“For Dad, everything is really about work,” Cassie said. “Even the things that don’t seem like they are.”

“I’m sorry,” Zoe said. “I know you don’t like nature. And I made you come out here anyway.”

“It’s all right,” Cassie said. “I understand. But you’re never going to get to know Dad this way. You can’t force him into something he doesn’t want to do. That’s just the way he is.”

“But I shouldn’t need to force him,” Zoe said. “He should *want* to spend more time with us.”

Cassie shrugged.

“I know,” she said. “But that’s the way he is. Sometimes I think it’s the reason Mom ran away.”

Cassie looked at her feet.

“Sometimes I feel like doing the same,” she said.

Zoe blinked, surprised at Cassie’s honesty.

“This wasn’t a good idea,” Zoe said. “We should never have come here.”

Bryan’s footsteps approached.

“It’s nothing major,” he said, tucking his phone in his pocket. “They’re just halting drilling for a while. They encountered something hard at the bottom of the site.”

“Bryan, can we talk for a minute?” Zoe said.

“Sure,” Bryan said. “What about?”

“Not here,” Zoe said.

She walked away from the campsite and toward the stream. They sat down on rocks that faced one another.

“I think this trip was a bad idea,” Zoe said. “Let’s draw a line under it and go back to the city.”

“What happened?” Bryan said.

“I need someone present, someone who will be there when I need him,” Zoe said. “I don’t need a robot.”

“I’m not a robot,” Bryan said. “But you have to understand that I have a company to run.”

“Then I suggest you run it,” Zoe said. “But leave me and Aaron out of it.”

Bryan fixed her with an icy glare.

“Fine,” he said.

“Good,” Zoe said. “And just so you know, I think Cassie’s hurting. You need to give her more attention.”

“I’ll take care of my own child, thanks,” Bryan said, voice spiked with poison. “We’ll come back with you to the fracking plant, but we won’t be heading back in the same car. We’ll get a lift with Rosetta.”

“Great,” Zoe said. “Maybe then you can get more work done.”

They marched back to the campsite. Everything was packed up and ready to go.

“Where are we headed now?” Aaron said. “I was just checking the map and there’s a cool-looking gorge near here.”

“We’re going home,” Zoe said.

“Home?” Aaron said. “Why are we going-?”

“Get your bag,” Zoe said. “We’re going.”

Aaron and Cassie exchanged a glance. Aaron’s held concern, Cassie’s excitement.

“You too, Cassie,” Bryan said. “Pick up your bag. We’re going.”

“I’m already packed,” Cassie said.

She scooped up her backpack and slipped her arms through the straps.

The foliage behind them rustled and a pair of deer emerged. They did not look surprised to see people there. Their eyes were wide, and darted left and right with concern, as if sensing a predator close by. They took off into the forest with a single powerful leap. Birds rose from branches and took flight, darkening the sky.

“What’s going on?” Aaron said.

“Do you think they’re running away from something?” Zoe said.

“How can they be?” Bryan said. “They’re all running in different directions.”

Worms and centipedes wriggled out of the soil around their feet and crawled away. Squirrels leapt from tree trunk to tree trunk, claws scrabbling at the bark. Bryan was right. They were running in different directions, but they all had one thing in common…

“They’re running away from *here*,” Zoe said.

They all shared a look.

“Let’s get out of here,” Zoe said.

The ground shook. The weight of Cassie’s backpack made her lose her footing. She fell back. Bryan stepped toward her, but he too was shaken and fell to his knees. Zoe ran to Aaron and held him in her arms. The world was shaking and alive with energy. The sky blazed yellow like it was on fire and crows cawed high overhead. For a moment Zoe thought the world was about to end.

“Is it an earthquake?” Bryan said.

“Not in this part of California,” Zoe said. “But it might be an intraplate quake.”

The world began to slow, still shaking, but calmer now.

“What was that?” Zoe said.

“I don’t know,” Bryan said. “But we’d best get out of here.”

They got to their feet, but before they could take another step there was a loud creaking noise and a loud thump as something massive struck the earth. Then another, and another, like a giant was running toward them.

*Errrr-ghhhhh!*

Zoe looked up to see a giant tree sway uncertainly in the air, and then fall to one side and slam into the earth, shaking the ground. No sooner had the tree fallen than another tree performed the same ritual and it too pummeled the earth. The rocks around them began to dance, like a plucked guitar string, vibrating in place. Even the large boulders began to quiver. Then they sank into the earth.

Zoe’s eyes widened at the realization of what was taking place. She had studied them for years, analyzing dozens of reports and videos, but she had never experienced one herself before. Until now.

“Sinkhole,” Zoe said, whisper thin. Then louder: “It’s a sinkhole! Run!”

They did, instinctively away from the falling trees and sinking rocks. The earth beneath their feet jittered like the earth in a gold miner’s pan. Their feet slipped and slid underneath them. They could barely keep their feet as the earth gave way.

Zoe looked back to see a gaping hole spreading toward them. She ran as fast as her feet could carry her. She held onto Aaron’s hand and pulled him forward with her, but they slipped and fell. Bryan was on them, lifting them up onto their feet without breaking stride.

And then the earth gave way completely, and it felt like they were wading through a snowdrift. The world roared around them like they were in a waterfall.

The earth rained over Zoe, dousing her with clods of grass. She clawed at the dirt and rocks with her hands, snatching at protruding tree roots. As the dirty mist settled, Zoe realized she wasn’t the only one clinging onto dangling tree roots. Bryan, Cassie and Aaron were too. Dirt, mud and rocks fell into the huge hole below them.

“We’re okay,” Zoe said. “It’s stopped. We just have to climb up and we’ll be fine.”

She reached up and grabbed a handful of tree roots.

*Crunch!*

Zoe fell, the tree roots still in her hand. She screamed. So did Bryan, Aaron and Cassie as they fell down, down, down into the depths of the sinkhole below.

# 33

THE PHONE RANG and rang but Bryan didn't answer. It wasn't like him. In fact, Rosetta couldn't recall a time when he hadn't answered within the first few rings – even when it was the middle of the night.

*Zoe certainly has him on a tight leash*, Rosetta thought. If she wasn't careful, she was going to end up strangling herself with it. Cutting Bryan off from his company was like cutting him off from oxygen. She only risked damaging their relationship. Bryan had two children; Cassie and Angelo Industries. He was not about to hand over control to someone else, no matter how much he loved her.

Rosetta hit the redial button and listened to the tone again. Perhaps he had dropped or lost his phone. It was easy to do while out in the woods, hopping over rocks and fallen trees. He could have been juggling various items trying to find the one he needed. Somehow Rosetta found that hard to believe. Bryan wasn't the dropping-something-by-accident type. And if he had dropped it, he would have sent her an email. She hadn't received one.

She felt a tingling sensation up her arm. She always felt it in times of danger, and the loss of her arm hadn't weakened the sensation. In fact, it had only seemed to have strengthened it, as if her body was making up for the loss. She felt the tingle in her real arm for the last time while out on patrol in Afghanistan.

It happened an instant before a white flash. The next thing she knew, there was a searing hot pain. She still sometimes woke up in a sweat. If there was a hell, that was what it would have felt like. She also had shrapnel in her thigh, but it was a pinprick compared to the pain in her arm. She peered around at the wreckage of her jeep and noticed the empty seats where her comrades-in-arms had been just a moment before.

She passed in and out of consciousness more times than she could recall. Each time she saw the same grey wisp of smoke rising up into the blue sky. She had just laid there, with nothing to do besides try and ignore the pain. It was only by sheer luck someone from search and rescue had found her. The story was they were making one last sweep of the site before they had to hit it. Enemy troops were on their way.

They lifted up the corrugated iron sheeting and their eyes widened, shot through with temporary expressions of disgust. Not the most comforting of signs. They staunched the wound at her side and then strapped her inside the helicopter. She fell in and out of consciousness over the next two weeks, remembering little besides bright white lights and trundling wheels.

She was attached to a machine that made faint bleeping noises like the ringing tone on the end of Bryan's phone. She panicked, lying there, barely able to move. She had been wrong. *This* was hell. Those were the most terrifying moments of her life.

Then a nurse came over and turned off the machine.

"Nice to see you're awake," she said.

Awake. She wasn't dead after all.

"What am I doing here?" Rosetta said.

It was a stupid question. Why was anyone in hospital?

"You were involved in an accident," the nurse said. "The search and rescue team found and brought you here."

Rosetta squinted at the nurse's nametag.

"Delia, where's the rest of my squad?" she said. People were nicer when you knew their name. "Are they in another ward?"

A sadness swept across Delia's face then. She must have been new. A soft heart like hers couldn't survive in an army medical unit for long.

Rosetta looked away, tears coming to her eyes.

"You lost an arm in the explosion," Delia said. "The surgeons were able to stop the bleeding."

Rosetta wasn't ready to take that in. She was still reeling with the loss of her friends.

"How long have I been here?" Rosetta said.

Her legs felt weak. She tried to sit up but couldn't.

"Two weeks," Delia said.

Rosetta went through painful and exhausting therapy to regain the use of her limbs. She learned to hate the parallel bars. After just a few weeks the muscles of her body had already weakened. So much for months of intensive training. She would have to work on rebuilding them. But that wasn't her main problem.

Her main problem was the loss of her arm. Try as she might, she just couldn't get used to not having it there. She would turn around and expect to pick up a book or piece of paper, or to move aside as someone passed, only to lose her balance and collapse on the floor. Things would never be the same again.

They plonked a plastic lump on her shoulder and called it a 'prosthetic'. It was an early Angelo Industries model. She hated it. It could carry out only the simplest of movements, and looked as much like an arm as a child's drawing.

Returning to US soil, she was rebuffed at every door. No one wanted to give a job to a one-armed former servicewoman. She wanted to scream at them that she had put her life on the line for her country, for them. But she didn't. Perhaps that was part of the reason for their discomfort. They felt guilty, knowing they should help, but unwilling to take the risk.

She survived on her savings for eight months, squeezing out every cent she could. She was on her last dollar and had nowhere to go. It was only Bryan, taking pity on her and her loss during the war, that the world seemed to stop ignoring her and give her a little luck for a change.

He had taken her in when no one else would. He showed her kindness, like a childhood friend. He enrolled her on the testing program so she would get the latest in robotic limbs without any of the cost. If Bryan was in trouble she was determined to help him. She owed him.

Bryan's answer machine asked her to leave a message. She hung up.

The final thing he said to her the day he left to go camping came back to her: "If I don't answer my phone, come and rescue me."

They had both laughed, but it didn't seem so funny now.

*Come and rescue me.*

Not since the day she lost her arm did she feel such a tingling in her phantom limb. Something was wrong. She needed to take action now.

# 34

ROOTS SLAPPED his face like an unwelcome wake-up call, and before he could react, a rock smacked him on the forehead. Aaron opened his mouth to cry out when a cascade of dirt smothered him. He coughed, choking on it, feeling it ram up his nose and down his throat. He coughed again, breathing it in. The dirt only made the dark flat rock surface more slippery. He dug in his heels to stop, but he couldn't get any purchase and kept falling.

He raised his leg to the roof to jam himself into place, but his foot only jolted back and tore the dirt loose, spilling on top of him in a thicker wave. The stones cut his cheek. He pressed his hand to it to staunch the bleeding. The flat rock angled down, and he fell faster, almost straight down, losing touch with the platform and falling through the air.

He smashed into something below, hard, and his legs crumpled beneath him. Now he was sliding backwards, headfirst. He tucked in his legs and spun around.

There was a rushing sound, like a waterfall, and he slid through something slimy. Stagnant water splattered over him like a wet curtain. The surface tilted to one side and he followed it around, and then up at a slight angle. The earth brushed against the top of his head. He lay down on his back as the tunnel became narrower.

He slowed to a stop, legs dangling over the side of what felt like a long drop. He was panting. He took a moment to get his breath. Darkness surrounded him on all sides. He got to his hands and knees and looked in the direction he'd come.

There was a scraping sound, coming from directly in front of him. Out of the darkness came a rushing scream. Aaron caught sight of Cassie's face, eyes wide with fear, face smeared with dirt, mouth open and black, before she smacked into him, knocking him over the side.

Aaron hit another surface. Thankfully it wasn't as far as he had feared. Cassie slid down the surface ahead of him and into nondescript darkness. He wondered how he managed to see anything at all, but he was moving too fast to get a good look at what was casting the light, something buried in the sides of the tunnel walls.

He flew in Cassie's wake. She screamed, never stopping or coming up for air. He hated being by himself in this eternal darkness of dirt and grime. He twisted his body to angle himself toward her screams, but he couldn't see her.

He lowered his head to gain speed. He needed to keep up or else be by himself again, and that scared him more than anything. And then, abruptly, and without preamble, the horror slide came to an end as he struck a hard floor and rolled to a stop.

# 35

CASSIE WHIMPERED, tugging in each breath like it was her last. They were both alive, puffing and panting from the exertion on the hard cold floor. Neither of them moved a muscle, concentrating only on breathing. After a moment it occurred to Aaron that it was a wonder he *could* breathe. He began to get to his feet.

"Cassie?" he said.

She didn't answer him.

Aaron put his inhaler to his lips and breathed in a deep breath.

"Are you okay?" he said.

"I just took a ride on the slide from hell," Cassie said. "I'm right as rain."

"I mean, do you have anything broken?" Aaron said.

Cassie sat up and shook her head.

"No," she said. "You?"

"A couple of twisted ankles," Aaron said. "A cut on my cheek."

"I'm not carrying you," Cassie said.

"Thanks for your concern," Aaron said.

"Where are we?" Cassie said.

"I don't know," Aaron said. "Hell?"

They were in a small space, a malformed cave. It was dry and there were no stalactites. The walls were rough like house bricks, covered with a layer of dust.

"I can't believe this is happening," Cassie said.

"Where did our parents go?" Aaron said.

"I don't know," Cassie said. "I saw them sliding. Ahead of me, I think. But then they were gone."

"They were definitely sliding down here?" Aaron said.

"I think so," Cassie said. "They were when I last saw them."

"Then where are they?" Aaron said.

"How should I know?" Cassie said.

"If they slid down the same place as us there's no reason to suppose they wouldn't be here with us," Aaron said.

"Then they must have gone another way," Cassie said.

Aaron looked at the walls.

"What did we ever do to deserve to be in a place like this?" he said. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"The earth erupting," Cassie said. "The trees falling over, the ground swallowing us. You?"

"Same," Aaron said.

There was a glowing light, faint, like dulled candle flames in the walls. There were dozens of them. When Aaron moved his eyes, more of them emerged, like a starry sky.

"What do you think they are?" Cassie said.

"Bugs, by the look of it," Aaron said.

He poked one, and it shrank back, emitting no light, and then gradually it began to glow again, little by little, increasing the wattage from its small writhing body.

"Don't," Cassie said. "I like the light."

So did Aaron. He never wanted to be in the darkness again. He would have nightmares about that shaft for as long as he lived.

"Wait," Cassie said. "Can you hear that?"

Aaron listened.

“Hear what?” he said.

“Sh!” Cassie said.

Aaron listened again, but still couldn’t make anything out.

“I think it’s coming from here,” Cassie said, pressing her ear to a wall that looked identical to the others.

Aaron did likewise.

“I don’t hear anything,” he said.

“Listen,” Cassie said. “Voices.”

“Voices,” Aaron said flatly. “Are you sure you didn’t hit your head too hard on the way down?”

Then he heard them. One higher-pitched, the other lower. They were working in tandem, first one, and then the other. A conversation.

“It’s them,” Cassie said. “Our parents.”

“Are you sure?” Aaron said.

Now it was Cassie’s turn to offer a flat stare.

“I’m sure there are lots of people down here with the same cadence of voices as our parents,” she said. “Looks like the kind of place to have a VIP list.”

“All right,” Aaron said. “I was just saying.”

Cassie beat on the wall with her palm.

“Dad!” she shouted. “Dad!”

The glow bugs around them dulled a few watts, like they had hit the dimmer switch, and then gradually rose in brightness again.

“What’re they doing? Cassie said.

“Looks like they’re affected by sound,” Aaron said.

He banged on the wall, and the bugs lowered in wattage again. Then he knelt down and ran his hand over the stones. His fingers slipped through a hole. He lowered his face to it and peered through a small tunnel. He caught sight of dust kicked up in a plume of dirt, and then a pair of ragged boots that he recognized immediately.

“Mom!” Aaron shouted through the hole. “Down here! In the wall!”

The figure moved in front of the wall until her eye flashed at the other end of the tunnel. It filled with tears.

“Aaron!” Zoe said. “My baby! Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine,” Aaron said. “How are you and Bryan?”

“We’re fine,” Zoe said. “Is Cassie with you?”

“Yes,” Aaron said.

“How is she?” Zoe said.

“She’s fine,” Aaron said.

“Good,” Zoe said. “We need to get out of here. Any ideas?”

“This wall doesn’t look too thick,” Aaron said. “We could knock through it.”

“How?” Zoe said. “I could try Bryan’s head, but I don’t think even his head is thick enough.”

“Hey!” Bryan said.

“Look around you,” Aaron said. “Maybe there’s something we can use.”

Aaron scrubbed their small cave with his eyes. The glow bug light illuminated lumps on the floor. Most of it was dirt, but other objects jutted out of it too. He approached it and pressed his hands to it. He got a splinter from a branch.

“Cassie,” Aaron said. “Help me with this.”

Together they picked up the branch limb and dragged it over to the wall. They turned back to the mounds of dirt and rolled a large round rock over, placing it beside the wall, and then put the tree branch on top of it. They could hear Bryan and Zoe striking the wall on the other side.

“Now what?” Cassie said.

“The wall is made up of small rocks,” Aaron said. “We should be able to work them loose.”

Cassie looked at the wall and noticed it did indeed consist of piled up rocks, pounded tight under their own weight.

“What if when we work it loose the roof falls on us?” she said.

“Do you care?” Aaron said. “We either die slowly, running out of oxygen, or we get crushed instantly. I know what I’d prefer.”

Cassie shivered.

“Are those the only options?” she said.

*Thud, thud, thud!* The sound of their parents beating against the wall, sending vibrations through their feet. Grains of dust drifted down on their heads. The wall was not stable.

Aaron jammed one end of the tree limb under a protruding rock and then moved to the other end of the limb.

“We’ll both have to press our weight down on it,” Aaron said.

“On the count of three,” Cassie said. “One, two, three!”

They pressed their weight down, but the rock didn’t budge.

“Bounce,” Aaron said, face turning red.

The tree branch creaked ominously. The rock in the wall shifted ever so slightly. A curtain of dust drifted down. The rock shifted and fell through on the other side. Zoe and Bryan continued to thud against it. There was a crunch, and a pair of rocks shifted on either side of the one they had removed.

There was a shout on the other side of the wall. Aaron couldn’t make out what it was.

“Get back!” he said.

The wall folded like a house of cards.

# 36

A THICK PLUME of dust rose up like a morning mist, obscuring what remained of the wall. The glow bugs increased their low level of light, fading up like a spotlight. A pair of shadows stepped through the dust toward them, entering their cave.

Zoe rushed forward and embraced Aaron, wrapping her arms around him tight, so tight he could hardly breathe. He didn't mind. He hugged her back just as hard. Aaron peered out the corner of his eye to see Bryan and Cassie were doing the same. Then Bryan looked up and saw Aaron. He extended his arm to him and Zoe. Aaron and Cassie were squashed between their parents, looking awkwardly at each other. They made no attempt to hug.

They stayed like that for a moment, letting the relief wash over them. Then they broke apart.

"I thought I'd lost you," Zoe said.

"Technically you did," Aaron said.

"That was some wild ride, huh?" Cassie said.

She shook her head, and a torrent of dirt billowed like a tiny sandstorm.

"Now what?" Bryan said.

"Where's your cell?" Zoe said. "Maybe it will work down here."

"I doubt it," Bryan said.

"Try anyway," Zoe said.

Bryan reached into his pocket. He frowned, and then tried his other pockets. He looked at Zoe and shrugged.

"You had it on you this whole time and *now* you lose it?" Zoe said. "What about your other gear?"

Bryan sat his bag down on the floor and opened the top flap. He rifled through the items inside and came out with his laptop and internet device. He connected them up and turned them on. Somehow, they still worked.

"No signal though," Bryan said.

"Big surprise," Aaron said.

"How far down do you think we fell?" Zoe said.

Aaron shook his head.

"A long way," he said. "I'm not sure how far."

"There must be a way out," Zoe said.

"I hope so," Cassie said, "because we haven't got much time left. We're inside a giant hourglass."

They all turned to look at what she was facing. In the other room, where Zoe and Bryan had been but a moment ago, sand spilled through a hole in the roof, caused by knocking the partition wall down. Large mounds were already forming.

"Great," Zoe said. "Just what we need."

"We need to figure out a way of getting out of here and back up onto the surface," Cassie said. "Zoe, you're a seismology thingy. You know about different types of rocks and dirt and stuff. Is there any way we can get back up to the surface?"

Zoe shook her head to clear the cobwebs.

"I don't know," she said. "I can't think of anything."

"Well, think fast," Cassie said. "I don't know how long we've got in here, but I don't think we've got long. The amount of oxygen will soon run out."

"I'm sorry," Zoe said. "This is all my fault. If I hadn't insisted on going on a camping trip we wouldn't be here."

“It’s not your fault,” Bryan said. “This could have happened to anyone, anywhere. We just need to focus on getting out of here.”

Aaron stood at a wall.

“What is it, Aaron?” Bryan said.

“There’s sunlight on the other side of this wall,” Aaron said. “Come look.”

They rushed over and peered through the holes.

“He’s right!” Bryan said. “I can see greens!”

“And yellows!” Zoe said.

“And this wall,” Aaron said, rapping on it with his knuckles. “It’s like the dividing wall we just knocked down. Made up of these pebble-like rocks. If we could knock it down…”

Bryan looked back at the sand filling their tiny living space.

“We’ll have to hurry,” he said.

Bryan and Aaron moved the rock over to the front wall and placed the lever under a stone that stuck out farther than the others. Bryan and Zoe leapt onto the lever and pressed their weight against it. Aaron and Cassie added their own weight. The stone shifted and then fell through on the other side. Warm sunlight spilled across the floor.

“It’s given way!” Aaron said.

“But the wall hasn’t yet,” Bryan said. “Try again.”

They threw their weight against the lever again. *Snap!* The lever broke, but not before another rock gave way, and then, slowly, a third, and a fourth, a fifth, and then the whole wall collapsed, threatening to bury them alive.

“Hurry!” Bryan said. “Get outside! Quick!”

# 37

THEY RUSHED THROUGH the dust cloud and out into the light. Cassie tripped and fell, but was up in an instant, followed by the others. They spun around, watching the last of the cave wall as it collapsed in upon itself in a terrifying rush, blocking the sand and locking it down like a dam. The dust billowed around the family, making them cough and wheeze.

"That was close," Zoe said, slapping the dust off her pants.

"Wow," Aaron said.

He had his back to them, to the collapsed wall, and was looking out in the opposite direction. When Zoe turned and looked, her breath caught in her throat too.

An incredible vista spread out before them; a jungle of yellows and greens and reds and purples, the variety of nature under a huge domed ceiling with a bright light emanating from a giant floating globe in the center.

Birds flew over the jungle in a flock and descended back down into the trees. On the right, from a fissure in the roof of the wall, a waterfall cascaded down into the basin. A thin spray of water drifted over the jungle creating a mist.

"Where are we?" Cassie said.

"Nowhere I've ever seen before," Aaron said. "Except on the cover of an Arthur Conan Doyle novel."

"This is impossible," Aaron said. "How can this exist underground?"

"Open your eyes," Cassie said. "It's clearly not impossible."

"But how can an ecosystem survive like this?" Aaron said. "And where is that light coming from?"

"It's not a sun," Zoe said, holding her hand over her eyes. "They're glow bugs. Like the ones in the cave. They joined together to form a sun, one really bright light."

"Do you think maybe someone built it?" Bryan said. "The government, maybe?"

"For what purpose?" Zoe said.

"To carry out secret tests," Bryan said. "Or store DNA in case there's an apocalypse."

"A small shelf in a lab seems a better use of time, space and money to me," Zoe said.

"Then what is it?" Bryan said.

"An underground ecosystem," Zoe said. "Previously unknown. This is an incredible find."

"It's better than our cave prison, at least," Bryan said. "And you got what you wanted. We get to go on a real adventure."

"This wasn't quite the adventure I had in mind," Zoe said.

"I need a wash," Bryan said. "Do you see any pools around here?"

"No," Zoe said. "Looks like the land slopes inwards. We're going to have to head into the jungle if we want water. Food too."

"The jungle?" Bryan said, turning pale. "What if someone comes to look for us? Shouldn't we stay here?"

"Who's going to come for us?" Zoe said.

"My assistant might," Bryan said.

"Rosetta?" Zoe said. "Why would she come?"

"I don't know," Bryan said. "But she always seems to know what's about to happen in my life before I do. I'm surprised she hasn't rescued us already."

"Not this time," Zoe said.

"Then, no one is going to come for us?" Cassie said. "But… But I've got appointments with friends. I can't… We can't…"

Cassie ran at the sheer cliff wall and beat at it with her fists.

“I can’t stay down here!” she said. “I’ve got a life!”

“We’ve all got lives to be getting back to,” Bryan said.

But this did nothing to appease Cassie, who sniffled. Bryan wrapped an arm around her slender shoulders. They were still hunched, but she seemed a little comforted.

“We could stay here, going into the jungle only to get food,” Bryan said. “Play for the long term.”

“And wait for what?” Zoe said.

“Rescue,” Bryan said.

“No one knows we’re here,” Zoe said. “And even if they did, how are they going to tunnel through God knows how much earth to reach us? Believe me, I don’t like the idea any more than you, but we’re going to have to go into the jungle.”

“We don’t know how far we came,” Bryan said. “We might be near the surface.”

“Look at this place,” Zoe said. “Do you really think we’re just beneath California?”

“It’s possible,” Bryan said.

“Our fall earlier certainly felt farther than a few meters to me,” Zoe said.

“It was dark,” Bryan said. “It’s hard to judge distance and time in darkness.”

“You’re welcome to try and make the climb and dig your way out,” Zoe said. “But I say we don’t sit around and wait for them to find us. We have to save ourselves.”

Bryan arched his neck up at the sheer cliff wall they had just emerged from. It curved all the way up, and then bent inwards, forming a dome, the jungle in the center. The trees were pressed up tight against the left and right-hand sides, sloping down at an angle from where they stood, so they could see right to the opposite wall. It looked to be a copy of the one they had just come through.

“How far would you say the opposite side is from us?” Zoe said.

“Twenty miles,” Bryan said. “Maybe twenty-five. Hard to say. Why?”

Zoe peered through her camera at the opposite wall.

“Because that’s where we have to head,” she said.

“Why?” Bryan said.

“Looks to me like it’s the way out of here,” Zoe said. “There’s a bunch of holes. The rocks look different to what we have on this side.”

“Can I have a look?” Bryan said, gesturing to Zoe’s camera.

Bryan peered through it using the zoom function. The wall became large, rearing up before him. He had to hold his hands steady. The slightest movement made the camera veer wildly to one side. When he managed to hold it in place he could see the markings Zoe had mentioned. They were big black holes like deep pockmarks, craggy and worn.

“What makes you think they’re the way out?” Bryan said.

“It’s not over here,” Zoe said. “It has to be there.”

*Or there’s no way out*, Bryan thought. He could see Zoe thought the same. But neither of them uttered the words in front of the kids.

“We have to head somewhere,” Zoe said.

“There could be anything in there,” Bryan said.

“What’s the matter?” Zoe said. “Scared?”

“Terrified,” Bryan said. “Sorry I’m not the hero type. I’m just a regular guy. If we’re going through this thing, I want to get through as quickly as possible.”

“You’ll get no argument from me,” Zoe said.

“What if there isn’t a way out and we’re stuck here forever?” Cassie said.

Bryan and Zoe exchanged a look. So much for not scaring them.

“Then at least we have each other,” Zoe said.

Cassie seemed horrified at the prospect.

“When is someone most likely to notice we’re missing?” Zoe said.

“As I said, if Rosetta doesn’t notice, then not until next Monday,” Bryan said. “You?”

“Same,” Zoe said. “Though they’re unlikely to take much action besides a few phone calls to my cell for a few days. Then my boss might go to my house, check up on me, find I’m not there. Then he might call the police. And when they search for us there’s unlikely to be much of us left to find. The sinkhole swallowed everything.”

“My laptop and phone have GPS,” Bryan said. “They’ll be able to find where the signal last was.”

“But what if they decide you actually turned your phone off to be with us?” Zoe said.

Bryan had no answer for that.

“And when they turn up, there’s nothing there?” Zoe said. “And if the sinkhole doesn’t give way again, will they really dig however deep we’ve fell to find us? I don’t think so. We’re just going to have to save ourselves.”

They stood on an outcrop of rock looking into the dense foliage, welcomed by sounds from the beaks, snouts and lips of various invisible creatures, likely never heard before by human ears. The family shared a hesitant look.

Zoe hesitated. Then she took the first step into the jungle.

# 38

THICK VINES covered the ground, engulfed the trees, and hung from branches like unkempt bunches of electrical cables. It was an entirely different beast than the forest they'd been walking and camping through on the surface.

A bizarre bird with a large curved black beak clacked its jaws together before flapping its wings and taking flight, joining a flock of similar-looking creatures.

"Where are we?" Bryan grumbled. "Wonderland?"

He came to a bright purple flower with blue spirals worked into its center. He lowered his nose to it and breathed in its heady scent. The flower petals opened wide. Bryan opened his eyes to see a vine twist through the air, dancing toward him. It touched him delicately on the cheek, feeling his face, and then pulled back. Razor-sharp teeth flew out and snapped at him. He backed away, just far enough so the vine couldn't reach him.

Zoe sliced the flower's stem and it fell to the ground, writhing like it was in pain.

"Don't touch anything," she said. "This is an alien world. We're the trespassers here."

"Yes, sir," Bryan said, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "Yes indeed."

Zoe bent down to inspect the flower.

"This species of plant hasn't been on the surface of the Earth for the better part of a hundred million years," she said.

"They should never have existed at all," Bryan said, still shocked by what he'd seen.

Zoe pushed the leaves of a bush aside and bent down to peer closer at a pool of stagnant water. It had a thick white skin on top, like custard left out for ten minutes.

"I'm not sure we should be washing in that," Bryan said.

"It's not water," Zoe said. "It's primordial slime. It hasn't changed in billions upon billions of years. It might well be the origin of life on our planet. I have to take a sample."

"Don't touch it," Bryan said. "You don't know what it might do to you."

"I know what it'll do to my career if I don't," Zoe said. "This is the Holy Grail."

She reached into her backpack and took out a small plastic bag and scooped up some of the goo. She tucked it away.

"This place is incredible," Zoe said.

She appraised every plant, looking it over, touching it in true hippy fashion. She unsheathed her camera and snapped pictures of everything they came across.

"Are we at a garden center, or are supposed to be trying to find a way out?" Bryan said impatiently.

"I'm just making the most of our time here," Zoe said. "Who knows when the next person will be here?"

"You're taking too much time," Bryan said. "You're going too slow. Now who's the one addicted to work? What's so amazing about them anyway?"

"Nothing," Zoe said, "besides the fact that some of these plants haven't existed above ground for millions of years."

"Neither will we if we can't get out of here," Bryan said. "Then you can take all the pictures you want."

"How is all this possible?" Aaron said, poking a grasshopper with a superfluous leg sticking out of its head. "How can so many creatures and plants have ended up down here?"

"Probably the same way we did," Zoe said. "Think about it. The Earth has a long history. All manner of animals have walked its surface in that time. The chances are that some of them would have come down here via a sinkhole at some point. After all, we have, so why wouldn't any other creature or plant? These sinkholes have been opening and closing and spewing out life

since the dawn of time. Look at this plant. It's more recent. A type of pansy. My aunt used to grow them. At some point they were brought down here too. Isn't this incredible?"

"Yes," Bryan said flatly. "Amazing. Can we get out of here now, please?"

"Everybody, come look at this," Zoe said, bending over a leaf and pointing to a giant caterpillar wriggling along a plant stem.

Bryan threw up his hands.

"Isn't it amazing?" Zoe said.

"Not really," Cassie said. "I've seen hundreds of the things."

"But not this particular variety," Zoe said. "This caterpillar was brought down here and managed to survive. Its ancestor would have lived with Ice Age creatures like the woolly mammoth and sabre toothed tigers. It makes you wonder what else might be here, doesn't it?"

"Have you ever seen anything like this place before?" Aaron said.

"It reminds me a little of the Amazon jungle," Zoe said. "But on steroids. There's so much diversity here. Look at this tree."

"Yes," Bryan said. "Why don't we?"

"You see these fungi?" Zoe said. "They're called agaricus taeniatus. They're native to China. While this tree they're feeding off is a kind of redwood, like from our very own backyards in California. They should never have mixed like this in the wild, and yet here they are. Sinkholes don't only occur in North America. In fact, some of the largest recent ones occurred in China. These things happen all over the world. And if that's the case, then they could have sucked down anything from anywhere at any time."

"Anything," Bryan said to himself, peering around at their surroundings with wary eyes. "Anywhere. Anytime."

Dragonflies hovered above their heads, gazing down at them through their compound eyes, before whizzing through the air. Humming birds floated like futuristic aircraft. The birds high in the trees sang beautiful songs like an orchestra, while small balls of feathers in the form of quails scampered about their feet. There were whistles, high and free and complex, and muffled popping sounds like gunshots going off in the distance, and honking noises like a tone deaf donkey.

It was a wonderland all right, Bryan thought. He wondered when the Queen of Hearts would show up.

# 39

"I'M DIRTY, I'm hungry, and I'm thirsty," Cassie said.

"Really?" Aaron said. "I almost forgot after the first thousand times you told us."

"And I'm tired," Cassie said.

"Here," Zoe said, reaching up into a tree. "It looks like an apple tree."

She plucked a few and handed them out.

"Look, pears are growing on it too," Zoe said. "And lemons."

They bit into the fruit faster than they could breathe, each of them starving hungry. They choked, but the fruit was so sweet and delicious they didn't care. After eating half a dozen each, they relaxed, tossing the stripped cores aside. Then Cassie's eyes widened at something she saw.

The pool of water was crystal clean, the floor visible, like the water on a remote Caribbean island, unblemished. Cassie ran toward it.

"Yes!" she said, dropping to her knees in front of it and preparing to dip her hands in.

"Wait!" Zoe said.

Cassie froze in place, fingertips centimeters above the surface.

"Don't touch it," Zoe said.

"Why?" Cassie said. "It's water."

"We don't know what it is," Zoe said. "It's a new place, a new system. It could be anything."

"Then what are we going to do with it?" Cassie said.

"Probably nothing," Zoe said. "Look. There's nothing on its surface or inside it."

"So?" Cassie said. "That just means it's clean, doesn't it?"

"So clean nothing living can survive in it," Zoe said.

"Maybe there just aren't any fish down here," Cassie said.

"The oceans are seventy-five percent of the surface of the Earth," Zoe said. "I'm certain there are fish down here, but not in this pool."

She snapped off a thin branch and tossed it into the pool. The branch floated. Nothing happened.

"See?" Cassie said. "You're worrying about nothing."

Smoke rose from the branch and it began to hiss. The wood cracked and whistled like it was on fire. The leaves shriveled up until they were small and black, disintegrated crisps. Within moments the branch was gone and the pool was perfectly clean again.

They all just stared, aghast.

"What was that?" Bryan said.

"Acid," Cassie said.

"Cassie, get away from the edge," Bryan said.

Cassie, body shaking, leaned back on her hands and shuffled away.

"Is there anything in this place that *won't* kill us?" Bryan said. "Carnivorous plants, deadly pools of acidic water. No wonder tales of hell exist."

"The things that are here were never meant to be put together like this," Zoe said. "Their worlds weren't meant to mix. They were meant to be separated by millions of years of gradual change, of progress. And now here they are, forced together. It makes for a potent mix. They're fighting for the right to survive, to reproduce. It's the Lost World, like Conan Doyle's famous novel. We've stepped back in time. And around every rock there could be danger."

# 40

THE TREE BRANCH had floated in the water for the past ten minutes. So far, nothing had happened.

"Looks like it's safe," Zoe said.

"Wait," Bryan said. "Are you sure?"

"As sure as I can be," Zoe said, taking off her boots. "It's not like I have my lab here to test it. But it hasn't disintegrated the tree branch. That's an improvement over the last lake."

Zoe put her hands into the water. It was cool and refreshing against her skin. She splashed it over her arms and shoulders. The others stood there watching, like starving men before a banquet.

"Aren't you going to wash?" Zoe said.

Cassie and Aaron headed a little farther down before entering.

"Don't go in too deep," Bryan said.

"I won't," Cassie said, rolling her eyes.

Zoe took off her top, wearing just her bra. She washed all the gunk and dirt and sweat off her body. She had never been so grateful for a bath her whole life.

She looked around at the world around them, alert for an attack at any moment. She cupped her hands and briskly washed her face before stopping and peering at her surroundings again.

Bryan sidled up to her.

"I need to speak with you," he said.

"Aren't you speaking now?" Zoe said.

"About something important," Bryan said.

"Can we not talk about this right now?" Zoe said. "We've got more important things to focus on."

"I'm not talking about us," Bryan said.

"Oh," Zoe said. "What is it then?"

"I didn't want to scare you or the kids," Bryan said under his breath. "But I found something a little while ago and I think you should see it."

"What is it?" Zoe said.

"It was… It was…" Bryan said, fading out.

He shook his head.

"I have to show you," he said.

"Can I finish washing first?" Zoe said.

She took her time, scrubbing away the dirt. She was covered in bruises and scrapes that she hadn't known were there. She could hear the kids splashing, washing themselves just over the rise.

"All right," Zoe said. "I'm ready. What is it?"

"Here," Bryan said, leading her a little farther down the waterside.

He knelt down beside a pair of small round holes joined together, with five dots above them. Zoe's eyes went wide.

"What do you think it is?" Bryan said.

"It's a footprint," Zoe said.

"I know that," Bryan said. "But from what?"

He clearly knew what it was, but didn't want to admit it.

Zoe peered at it again.

"You're sure it's not one of yours?" she said.

"Definitely," Bryan said. "I never came this far."

Bryan was right. His footprints led up to the footprint in question and then turned away. But more than that, they didn't match Bryan's footprint shape at all. Zoe bent down and put her fingers to it. It was barefoot, broad, but squat. Zoe peered around at the foliage around them with a keener eye, as if something was going to jump out at them at any moment.

"We need to get away from the water," Zoe said.

"Why?" Bryan said. "What is it? Maybe it's a chimp?"

"Maybe," Zoe said, though she didn't sound convinced. "I'm not a tracker, but I get the sense this creature walks upright, on two feet, though it seems to sway a lot – see the deeper indents on the inner and outer side of the print? He – or she – appears to be comfortable on two feet. And the toes are similar to ours. See? I think it's either a deformed man or a fairly modern ancestor."

"Ancestor?" Bryan said.

"Anything, anytime, anywhere," Zoe said. "Remember?"

The thought he might meet his ancestor made Bryan shiver. He didn't even like close family gatherings. He looked at the print again and then spotted something else. The footprint had stopped, as if the walker had taken flight. There were other footprints, ones that didn't head toward the water, but instead away from it, having never approached the body of water in the first place. These footprints were stunted and wide, with long claw marks.

*Claw marks.* Bryan turned and ran up the rise in the direction of the kids, his heart thumping in his ears.

"Bryan," Zoe said. "Where are you going?"

Bryan ascended the short rise and looked down at Cassie and Aaron, who had their backs to one another, washing. The reason the human ancestor footprint had suddenly disappeared was because it had been snatched off its feet. At the water's edge.

Floating no more than three meters from Cassie and Aaron was what looked like a huge floating log, except it wasn't a log. From his perspective he caught the creature's profile. He could make out the swish of its thick tail. Its head alone had to be three feet long. The skin over its eyes slid back revealing a cat-like slitted eye. It pressed forward.

# 41

CASSIE FELT a whole lot better now she was clean and the gunk had been washed off her body. She kept checking over her shoulder to make sure Aaron didn't look at her. He was either too fast for her to catch or he really was keeping his promise and not glancing at her. She kept checking over her shoulder anyway.

Something came out of the foliage and approached the waterside. It was small, with arms curled up by its side and a pointed snout that it dipped into the water.

"Man, that's one sick chicken," Cassie said.

"It's not a chicken," Aaron said. "It's a compsognathus."

"A what?" Cassie said.

"A compsognathus," Aaron said. "An ancient reptile."

"Wonderful," Cassie said, splashing water over her face. "At least we'll have something to eat down here."

"I'm not sure if we should eat it," Aaron said.

"I'll eat whatever's lying around," Cassie said. "I'm starving."

"No, you don't understand," Aaron said. "We shouldn't be able to eat it. That's what I meant to say."

"Why?" Cassie said. "Are they really fast?"

"No," Aaron said. "They're extinct. They've been extinct for many, many years."

Cassie looked back at the little beast.

"Looks plenty alive to me," she said. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Aaron said. "They died out around the time of the dinosaurs."

"Dinosaurs?" Cassie said.

"And that's because it *is* a dinosaur," Aaron said.

"A dinosaur?" Cassie said. "It's a bit on the small side for a dinosaur, isn't it? I thought they were massive?"

"They're not all brachiosaurs and diloposauruses," Aaron said. "Many of them were small like this. How else do you explain how they evolved into birds?"

"They evolved into birds?" Cassie said.

"Some did," Aaron said. "We should tell our parents. There might be lots of these things out there."

"No, don't," Cassie said. "They've got enough to worry about. Plus, I don't think they could be much safer, do you? They won't let us do anything by ourselves. Imagine how bad they'll be if they knew dinosaurs were about."

"Cass!" Bryan shouted. "Run!"

Cassie sighed.

"See?" she said.

She looked over at her father, standing on a slight rise.

"Why don't you try not shouting at me?" Cassie said. "I'm not a piece of meat."

Bryan pumped his arms and legs, making a beeline for them.

"Dad, what-?" Cassie said.

The words stuck in her throat. She caught sight of something in her peripheral vision. Two big yellow eyes in a long broad face. Her blood turned cold and she froze, unable to move. The giant crocodile opened its jaws wide and snapped at the water's surface.

"Cass!" Aaron said, seeing the giant crocodile.

He slapped the water's surface, getting the croc's attention. It turned its heavy head toward him.

“Cass!” Aaron said. “Get out! Get out now!”

Cassie scuttled sideways toward the shore like a crab. Bryan scooped up a handful of rocks and threw them at the large croc, striking it across the head and back. The crocodile hissed and opened its jaws wide in defiance.

But the crocodile was slow to move, and retreated back into the lake, sinking out of sight. Perhaps he had eaten earlier or didn’t want the chase. Whatever the reason, the crocodile turned away.

Bryan grabbed Cassie and Aaron by the arms, dragging them out of the water.

“What did I say?” he said. “Don’t go too far into the water. Isn’t that what I said?”

Cassie nodded, tears streaming down her face from the shock. Bryan hugged her and kissed her on the head, soothing her.

“I’m sorry,” Cassie said.

“It’s okay,” Bryan said. “You’re all right, that’s the important thing.”

He turned to Aaron.

“Thank you,” he said.

Aaron nodded back. Zoe wrapped her arms around him.

“We’re never going to survive here, are we?” Cassie said. Her voice was dead, cold. “One day we’ll wake up and we’ll be in something’s belly.”

Bryan didn’t reply to her, and just hugged her close. They were safe now. That was the important thing. It felt odd being at the bottom of the food chain. Bryan Angelo had never been at the bottom before. It was an unwelcome feeling. He felt vulnerable. And suddenly he was thrust into a world that was out of his control.

He didn’t like it. He didn’t like it one little bit.

# 42

BRYAN LEANED against a tree for fear he might collapse under his own weight. He shut his eyes and took deep breaths. The sweat ran down his face and drenched his T-shirt. The heat in the jungle was humid, close and sticky, like walking into an oven. Bryan took a small bottle out of a side pocket on his backpack.

"What's that?" Zoe said.

"Anti-mosquito spray," Bryan said. "I'm hoping the mosquitos down here aren't too different from ours and this stuff still works. The last thing I need right now is to be bitten to death."

He sprayed himself liberally with it.

"Give me some," Zoe said.

"Haven't you got your own?" Bryan said.

"I do, but it's in my bag somewhere," Zoe said.

Bryan handed the bottle over. Zoe raised it to her face. Aaron slapped the bottle out of her hand.

"Hey!" Zoe said.

"Is this the same stuff you've been using during the camping trip?" Aaron said to Bryan.

"Yes," Bryan said. "Why?"

As if in response, a low thrumming noise like helicopter blades grew louder over the dense jungle foliage.

"We've got to get out of here," Aaron said.

He tossed the mosquito bottle aside.

"What are you doing?" Bryan said. "I need that!"

"Trust me, you don't," Aaron said.

"But mosquitos are attracted to me like flies are to-"

The thrumming shook the ground. A vast dark blanket rose over the jungle canopy. A swarm of mosquitos. And they weren't just any mosquitos.

"Giant gallinippers," Aaron said, voice hoarse.

They were over an inch and a half long, notorious for their aggressive behavior and painful bite. And they were heading right for them.

"Oh my God," Bryan said, the blood draining from his face.

"Run!" Cassie said.

The sky turned black as the mosquitos swarmed overhead, the air vibrating with their powerful wings. The family leapt over a fallen tree trunk and splashed through small puddles. There was a *thud, thud, thud* as the mosquitos' stingers embedded themselves into the trees and stony ground at their feet.

Aaron felt the displaced air from a mosquito's wing right beside his ear. He waved his hand to scare it away, and struck something solid and heavy.

The foliage snapped and broke under their feet as they stormed through it. A body of water reared up ahead, the artificial sunlight from the glow bugs shimmering across its surface.

"The lake!" Bryan shouted. "Jump in the lake!"

"We don't know if it's acidic or not!" Zoe said.

"If we don't jump in and we get stung, we're dead anyway!" Bryan said.

"Not necessarily," Zoe said. "Everyone stop!"

They skidded to a stop. Zoe picked up a snapped branch and hurled it into the lake. The branch just floated there.

"*Now* can we jump in?" Bryan said.

"No," Zoe said. "Wait a second. It took some time before it reacted last time, remember?"

Bryan picked up a length of wood with a clump of leaves on the end and swung at a cloud of mosquitos. He felt them connect with his make-shift bat. They fell out of the air. Those unaffected continued to fly at him. Zoe brought her own swatter down, knocking a cloud into the ground. They were momentarily dazed before beginning to climb again.

They'd fought for twenty seconds, and yet the sweat dripped down their bodies. They couldn't fight much longer without getting stung. The main body of the swarm descended upon them now.

Bryan cast a look back at the lake.

"The branch is still in one piece!" he said.

"Jump in!" Zoe shouted.

They all did, the mosquito cloud just above their heads like a personal raincloud. They submerged, waving their arms to keep themselves under. Through the surface they watched a blurry, shimmering sight of hundreds of floating black objects. Some loomed so large they must have hovered mere inches above the surface.

Aaron's lungs burnt. His heart thumped in his ears, begging for oxygen. He'd run hard and was already short of breath. Beside him on either side he was aware of the others' hands moving in similar slow-motion movements. But still the mosquitos hung above them. Aaron tried to re-breathe the air he held in his cheeks, to coax more oxygen out of it.

Cassie shook her head, unable to wait any longer, and waved her arms to push up toward the surface. Bryan grabbed her leg and pulled her back down. A mouthful of bubbles floated up to the surface, and half a dozen mosquitos floated toward it, prodding at it with their huge stingers.

Bryan pulled Cassie close, despite her efforts to shake him off. Aaron snuck behind Carrie, grabbed her head, and pushed his lips against hers. Cassie's eyes went wide. Aaron forced what little air he had left in his body into her lungs. Cassie pulled back. Aaron felt his lips begin to open, desperate for oxygen.

Bryan gestured at their roof. The gallinipper mosquitos were moving away, back into the jungle. Once they were all gone, the family waited an excruciatingly long extra few seconds before they floated up and broke the surface, gasping in the sweet oxygen.

They struggled to the beach on their hands and knees, and collapsed, half their faces staring at one another, the other half hugging the sand. They panted for air. If anything came for them now they would be finished. None had the energy to fight.

# 43

"I SWEAR," Cassie said, panting, "if you ever tell anyone what just happened…"

"It wasn't enjoyable for me either," Aaron said.

Cassie glared at him. Aaron smirked. Cassie raised a fist, but her muscles were too weak to throw it.

"You should be thanking him for saving your life," Bryan said, "not threatening him."

"But he kissed me!" Cassie said.

"He shared his oxygen with you," Bryan said. "There's a difference."

Cassie kicked a clod of dirt and grumbled under her breath.

"What do you say?" Bryan said.

Cassie looked from Aaron to her father.

"You're not serious!" she said. "I'm not thanking him for kissing me!"

Bryan's expression hadn't changed.

"Fine," Cassie said. She turned to Aaron with folded arms and a pinched expression. "Thank you. I hope you don't have cooties."

"Any time," Aaron said, his smirk fastened firmly to his face.

Cassie wanted to deck him.

"Bryan, you've been stung!" Zoe said.

A large protrusion, like a boil, stuck out from his neck.

"Don't touch it!" Bryan said.

"I'm not going to," Zoe said. "Get back in the water. The cold will help bring the swelling down."

Bryan sighed and lay back in the water.

"Why is it always me?" he said. "The more mosquito spray I use the more mosquitos attack me."

"Unless you're not using enough," Zoe said. "Mine seems to work fine."

"You should be using this stuff," Aaron said, reaching into his bag and coming out with his own mosquito spray.

"It's the same stuff," Bryan said.

"No," Aaron said. "It's not."

"What do you mean?" Bryan said.

Aaron looked at Cassie, who glared at him and shook her head.

"What's going on?" Zoe said.

"We may have swapped your mosquito spray for our own concoction," Aaron said.

"What?" Bryan said, sitting up, before flinching and sitting back down in the cool water again. "What for?"

"To put a spanner in the works," Aaron said. "Your spray attracted mosquitos, not repelled them."

"And you've been letting me use it this whole time?" Bryan said.

Zoe hid her mouth behind her hand.

"What are you sniggering about?" Bryan said.

"You've got to admit," Zoe said. "It is pretty funny."

"Funny?" Bryan said. "Including the part where they almost stabbed us all to death?"

"You wouldn't be laughing either if you knew the rest of it…" Aaron said to his mother.

"What rest of it?" Zoe said.

"Remember when you had diarrhea…?" Aaron said.

Zoe's smile curdled.

“We may have had something to do with that too,” Aaron said.

Now it was Bryan’s turn to laugh. He made no effort to hide it.

“Is there anything else you want to tell us about?” Zoe said, glaring at the kids.

“We may have put rocks in your bags while you weren’t looking,” Aaron said.

Zoe unzipped the top of her bag and sorted through her belongings.

“What the?” she said, reaching inside.

She pulled out a series of large rocks.

“You’re collecting mementos of this place?” Zoe said.

“We can explain,” Cassie said.

“You’d better,” Bryan said. “Why have we been carrying our own weight in rocks this whole time? Since when?”

“Since we stopped for water,” Cassie said.

“An hour ago?” Bryan said.

“No,” Cassie said, looking at her feet.

“When?” Zoe said.

“Two days ago,” Cassie said.

Bryan grunted.

“Why?” he said. “You thought I needed weight training?”

“No,” Cassie said. “Well, yes. But we just thought… We thought…”

“It was just a prank,” Aaron said.

“What about when the birds and mice attacked us?” Bryan said. “Was that the result of a prank too?”

“We wanted you to argue, so we could go home,” Cassie said, looking at her feet.

“In separate cars,” Bryan said. “Is there anything else? Nuts, maybe?”

“We didn’t mean to hurt anyone,” Cassie said.

“You almost killed me,” Bryan said.

“And… there are these,” Cassie said, pulling the fireworks from her backpack.

“You were going to try blowing us up?” Bryan said.

“If you didn’t want us together, why didn’t you just say so?” Zoe said.

“You both had your heart set on bringing us on this trip and making us like each other,” Cassie said. “You weren’t going to listen to us. No matter what we said.”

“You’re wrong,” Zoe said. She sounded hurt.

Aaron and Cassie shrugged their shoulders. They were full of difficult, competing emotions that pulled them one way, and then another.

“Let’s talk about this more later,” Zoe said. “Is there anything else you want to tell us about before we continue?”

Aaron and Cassie shook their heads.

“What should we do with them, Bryan?” Zoe said.

“I’m not sure,” Bryan said. “But I regret saving them from that crocodile now.”

He sat up and took the rocks out of his backpack.

“Why do I have so many?” Bryan said.

Cassie shrugged.

“You kept going for toilet breaks,” she said.

“Why didn’t you tell us about these rocks after we got down here?” Zoe said.

“We forgot,” Cassie said. “We’ve been a bit distracted.”

“You’re grounded!” Bryan said, still unloading the rocks. “Forever and a day!”

“I’m already grounded,” Cassie said.

“You mean, ‘undergrounded,’ don’t you?” Aaron said with a broad grin.

No one laughed.

“We’ll talk more about this in the morning,” Zoe said. “But I’m very disappointed in you. Both of you. Our trip was meant to bring us all together. But you were determined to doom it from the start.”

Something snapped in the undergrowth. They all tensed, picking up sticks. A small fuzzy animal hopped from the shrubbery.

“It’s just a rabbit,” Bryan said. “Shoo. Go on. Go away.”

The rabbit leaned back, opened its mouth wide, revealing a mouth full of sharp teeth, and then scampered across the woodland floor.

“We can’t sleep on the ground,” Bryan said. “We’ll be dead ten times over before we drop off.”

“Then where do you suggest we sleep?” Zoe said.

Bryan’s eyes drifted up to the canopy.

“If the land’s not safe, where else is there?” he said.

# 44

ROSETTA POURED OVER the map, taking in the large forest, the mountains and multiple rivers. Needle and haystack came to mind. She wasn't even certain which direction they had gone after leaving the fracking site. *Neither were they*, she realized. They were just heading out into the wild, letting their feet take them where they would. How was she going to find them? All she knew was their starting point as she had waved them off. Which direction would they go from there?

A stream cut through the forest from the northeast to the southwest. Rosetta ran her eyes over the terrain and visualized herself there, smelling the pine cones and the fresh air on her cheeks, and thinking about which direction she would head in next if she were in their shoes.

There was a knock on the door of the portacabin. It opened, admitting the foreman and a pair of men in hunting gear. One of the hunters took off his flat cap and wrung it between his hands. The other one saw this and did the same.

"These guys have something they'd like to tell you about," the site foreman said.

"Who are they?" Rosetta said.

"They're a couple of hunters from Lakota," the foreman said. He gestured to each man. "Rob and Roy. They were out hunting when they saw something."

The foreman nodded to the hunters, but they didn't speak. They looked nervous.

"What did you notice?" Rosetta said.

"We was hunting elk when there was this big disturbance," Rob said.

He had trouble speaking. His teeth were too big for his mouth.

"You see, animals have got this kind of extra sense," he said. "They know when something bad is about to happen, and that's when they took off into the woodland."

"That's right," Roy said, solemnly nodding his head.

"The birds took flight an' all," Rob said.

"That's right," Roy said.

"And then the ground shook and the trees fell over, and I thought it was going to be the end," Rob said. "No matter where we went, there was noise and there was no way of getting away from it."

"That's right," Roy said.

"And when it finally stopped, we was half-scared out of our wits," Rob said.

Rosetta waited for more. None came.

"That's it?" she said. "There's nothing else?"

Rob blinked, surprised at the response. Rosetta calmed herself.

"What do you think caused it?" she said.

"Ain't it obvious?" Rob said.

"Not to me," Rosetta said.

"The frightened animals, the crashing trees…" Rob said, as if giving Rosetta all the information she needed. "They was abducted by aliens!"

"Uh-huh," Rosetta said.

"I've heard of it happening in these parts before, folks disappearing without a trace, but I never thought I'd see it for myself, no sir," Rob said.

"That's right," Roy said.

"Yes," Rosetta said. "Right."

She extended her hand.

"Well, thank you for coming to us with this information," she said.

Rob shook her hand.

“You’re very welcome,” he said. “Always happy to be of service.”

Rosetta extended her hand to Roy. He looked at it, and then up at her eyes. The two hunters turned and left.

Rosetta shook her head.

“Only in the country,” she said.

“Sorry about that,” the foreman said. “They said they had important information. They wouldn’t tell me what it was till they got here.”

“It’s all right,” Rosetta said. “You weren’t to know.”

“Looks like your helicopter’s here,” the foreman said.

The blades kicked up a dust storm, spitting against the thin Perspex windows of the port-a-cabin. Rosetta put on her jacket and headed outside. She climbed into the cockpit and put on her headphones. The helicopter began to rise.

“Where do you want to head first?” the pilot said.

“Toward the river,” Rosetta said. “North.”

She had no idea what she was even really looking for, but she was certain it wasn’t aliens.

# 45

AS THE GLOW BUG SUN passed across the roof of the dome, more and more of the glow bugs broke away from the main body, spreading across the roof, forming a starry sky. On the opposite side of the roof to where the bugs had set, other bugs were already beginning to converge again, forming a new sun for the next day.

"Incredible," Bryan said.

"It really is," Zoe said. "There are so many things we have to learn about nature. A whole ecosystem beneath our feet we didn't even know about."

From their vantage on the tree branch they had an unobstructed view of the sky.

"Why do you think they do that?" Bryan said.

"I don't know," Zoe said. "Maybe they can sense the sun up in the sky on the surface, and they follow it. Maybe they've evolved to do it over millions of years, creating a symbiotic relationship with the other creatures down here."

"They're bugs," Bryan said. "How do they know to do that?"

"It's natural selection," Zoe said. "They don't know they're doing it. They just do it. It's a behavior they've learnt, passed on through the generations, or through their genes. The same way plants follow the sun across the sky without eyes, the way creatures know the right nuts to pick and store for winter. It's instinctive."

Bryan shifted position on the tree limb he lay on.

"At least we know the answer to some mysteries now," Bryan said. "From the mouths of the beasts themselves. It's not really our fault we argued during the whole camping trip after all."

"You don't honestly believe that, do you?" Zoe said.

"They confessed, didn't they?" Bryan said.

"But they're kids," Zoe said. "They might have pushed us-"

"I think it was more than just a push," Bryan said.

"-but we made our own decisions," Zoe said. "We were the ones who said we should take a break."

"So what are you saying?" Bryan said. "We should still take a break?"

"I don't know what I'm saying," Zoe said. "All I know is that when we argued it was because of us, not them."

"Not sure I totally agree with you there," Bryan said. "We might have been less irritable with fewer mosquito bites, lighter backpacks and delicious food. We might have tried to resolve our issues rather than just giving up the way we did."

"Maybe I wasn't ready for something serious," Zoe said. "Maybe I never will be."

"Don't say that," Bryan said.

"I thought if I found someone like me," Zoe said, "a single parent who's had to make sacrifices…" She shook her head. "Things just aren't simple any more."

"Just make me one promise," Bryan said. "Let's get out of this place and *then* decide what we're going to do next. How about that? Let's not make any rash decisions."

Zoe thought about it for a while.

"Okay," she said, though she didn't smile.

They look back up at the 'stars'.

"Do you think these bugs make formations?" Bryan said.

"Don't be ridiculous," Zoe said.

# 46

"THIS IS OUR FAULT," Aaron said. "They wouldn't be like this if it wasn't for us."

"You give us too much credit," Cassie said. "They're adults. They can make their own decisions. Maybe they're already married. They argue like it. I thought we were supposed to be the children?"

"I thought we were doing the best for them," Aaron said. "But we can't let them be miserable like this."

"It will be better for them in the long run, you'll see," Cassie said.

Aaron shook his head, not convinced. He lay back on his bedding, a pile of dirty clothes from his backpack. He held the snow globe in his hands and kissed it, studying the thousands of tiny flakes inside.

"Your dad's been gone seven years, hasn't he?" Cassie said.

"How did you know that?" Aaron said.

"I overheard our parents talking about it," Cassie said.

"Oh," Aaron said. "I didn't know Mom talked about it with anyone. Except me, I mean."

"Maybe she didn't," Cassie said. "But now she has someone to talk about it with. It's unlikely he'll come back after all these years, you know."

"You're starting to sound like Mom," Aaron said.

"I'm just saying," Cassie said. "Maybe it's time for you to move on."

"Dad's still alive out there somewhere, I know it," Aaron said.

"Don't you think he would have let you know if he was still alive?" Cassie said.

"He would try," Aaron said. "Maybe he got detained or something. Or he's a prisoner of war."

"A prisoner?" Cassie said. "I wasn't aware of a war in Alaska."

"That doesn't mean there can't be one," Aaron said. "A secret one, between tribes, or something. Dad could have been a spy. It could have all been a cover-up. He promised me he was going to come home. He never breaks his promises. Ever. Anyway, what do you know about it?"

Aaron said this in an aggressive tone.

"I know something about parents promising one thing and then doing another," Cassie said. "I lied to you before. About my mother. She didn't just disappear. She ran away. She left us."

"What do you mean?" Aaron said.

"I mean, she took off," Cassie said. "She was always doing it. 'My own little adventures' she called them. She wrote adventure books. To go find adventure, something exciting. She was a novelist and was always travelling around the world looking for inspiration. She would be gone for weeks – sometimes months – at a time. I used to like the idea of coming home from school to see if my mom would be there or not, and when she wasn't, I would dream up fantasies about where she'd gone. She used to send me postcards telling me where she was.

"She was creative, my dad always said. Their brains are wired differently to the rest of us. Maybe she finally found what she was looking for and decided not to come back."

Aaron shook his head.

"She had you and your dad to come back to," he said. "I'm sure she would have come back to you if she could."

"I'm not so sure," Cassie said. "I used to think it was something I'd done, that I'd forced her to leave. The day before she ran away I broke a vase she bought in Japan. I glued it back together, but she noticed and went crazy at me. The next thing, she was gone.

"I thought if I got a new one she would come back. I saved up my allowance for ages. I even sold all my games, and asked just for money for my birthday and Christmas presents, and finally

I had enough money and bought her a new one. I put it on the little stand and waited at the bottom of the stairs, watching the door. I waited and waited and waited, but she never came. I decided to do nothing. I wasn't going to try to bring her back again, because she wasn't going to come back."

"Your dad wasn't there for you?" Aaron said.

"He lost himself in his work," Cassie said.

She shrugged.

"It was okay," she said.

It clearly wasn't okay, but Aaron didn't push the issue.

"I can understand all that," Aaron said, "but why do you hang out with Clint? He's an asshole."

"You're right," Cassie said with a smile. "He is."

The admonition surprised Aaron.

"Then why hang out with him?" he said.

"Because sometimes knowing the right people can get you places," Cassie said.

"Where does Clint get you?" Aaron said.

"Through him I get to meet all the rich people in school," Cassie said. "Or, at least, their parents. Dad says half the battle in life is knowing the right people. Know lots of people and opportunities are easier to come by."

"Don't you want to be successful by yourself?" Aaron said.

"I will be," Cassie said. "But it doesn't hurt to make the right connections to make the journey easier. I'm going to work hard either way. I might as well meet people and call in favors when I need them."

Aaron shook his head.

"You don't agree with what I'm saying?" Cassie said.

"No," Aaron said. "Life is about more than just using people."

"Using people is what life is all about," Cassie said. "Friends, teachers, family."

She said the last word with a slight tremor in her voice.

"Your mother didn't use you," Aaron said.

"Yes, she did," Cassie said. "I was a whinging, whining kid. I held her back. That was why she kept going on trips. She must have hated having to return home to me. That's why it's better to use people, and then toss them. Trim away the fat."

"Is that what I am?" Aaron said. "Fat?"

He looked genuinely hurt.

"Aaron…" Cassie said.

"No, I'm glad I know," Aaron said. "I wouldn't want to make the mistake of thinking I was someone important to you. I'm disposable. I get it."

They were silent a long moment.

"That's no reason to use people," Aaron said. "Or pick on them at school."

"You were weird," Cassie said.

"So?" Aaron said. "Aren't we all a bit weird?"

"I'm not," Cassie said.

"You are," Aaron said. "You're the caricature cheerleader who dates quarterbacks and says catchphrases."

"I so am not!" Cassie said.

She caught her catchphrase and screwed up her face.

"My point is, why me?" Aaron said. "Of all the people, why did you have to pick on me? I never did anything to you."

"It's the way things are," Cassie said. "The way things will always be. The strong pick on the weak because they are weak."

“But we’re all the same,” Aaron said. “Our weaknesses only exist at school. After we graduate everything will change. Don’t you ever think about the things your friends say to people and how they affect them?”

Cassie shrugged.

“I thought you’d be used to it,” she said.

“I suppose I am,” Aaron said. “But not at the beginning. You can’t know what it’s like to have to go into a building or a room every day and know there’s going to be someone in there who might say something about you – the way you dress, or speak or smell or whatever. I used to love math, now I don’t even want to think about it. Because of your friends.”

“I’m sorry,” Cassie said. “I didn’t know I was having such a big impact on your life.”

“Well, you did,” Aaron said.

There was a pause.

“But you know, you’re not as weird as I thought,” Cassie said.

“No?” Aaron said.

“I mean, you are strange,” Cassie said. “You’re into things I don’t understand at all but… I don’t know. I guess you’re not a freak.”

“Thanks,” Aaron said. “I think. So, if I told your friends that we kissed…”

Cassie glared at him. Aaron held up his hands.

“I’m joking! I’m joking!” he said.

# 47

BRYAN DIDN'T SLEEP well that night. He dreamed of falling down a rabbit hole, deeper and deeper and deeper, heading toward a pinprick of light in the distance, but never quite getting there. When he woke up, he initially thought it had just been that: a dream. With his green surroundings and his aching back from a poor night of sleep, it was easy to believe he was still in the woods camping.

But then he spotted a lemur with blood-red eyes, hanging from the branch above, staring at him. It bent its head to one side in a caricature of curiosity.

They were up at first light, as the glow bugs coalesced, bunching up to form a tight ball of light on one side of the domed ceiling. The night soundtrack quietened but did not disappear, and remained there in the background.

They ate vegetables Zoe carefully selected from the foliage, and washed it down with some clean water from a flowing stream. They ate a lot, but were still hungry afterwards. It took the edge off their cravings. They put on their backpacks, now free of heavy rocks, and headed into the jungle.

"How much farther do you think we've got to go?" Cassie said.

"We did maybe half a day yesterday, so we've probably got a couple of days left yet," Bryan said.

Cassie groaned. Aaron did too, but his was more of a yelp as he fell face-first to the ground. Zoe helped him to his feet.

"Are you all right?" she said.

"I'm fine," Aaron said, dusting off his knees. "I just tripped on something."

Zoe looked at the offending item. A horn protruded from beneath a bush. No doubt just a wayward branch. But Zoe knelt down and put her hand to it. She must have noticed something about it because next she lifted the bush up.

"Guys," she said. "Come take a look at this."

Bryan and Cassie exchanged a look and rolled their eyes. What was it this time? Endangered dirt? A rare rock? But they said nothing.

Zoe pulled the foliage back further. It caught on whatever was underneath, and when she finally managed to pull it back completely, they found themselves gawping at a giant skeleton.

"Is that a skull?" Bryan said.

"Yes," Zoe said. "Isn't it beautiful?"

Bryan could think of many words to describe it, but beautiful wasn't one of them. Creepy, maybe. The yellowed bone had two large eye sockets, a pair of rounded humps on its forehead, and two long tusks jutting from the base of its skull.

"Is that an elephant?" Bryan said.

"It's a mammuthus," Zoe said. "A woolly mammoth."

"I don't think I've ever seen anything like it before," Bryan said.

"I'm sure you have," Zoe said. "In various natural history museums around the world. Strange that it should be here."

"It's strange *we're* here," Bryan said.

"No, I mean it's not the right environment for them," Zoe said. "The vegetation here, and the creatures we have seen, are all from a world long before these mammuthus were around."

"What are you saying?" Bryan said.

"I think this place we're in right now, this ecosystem, was formed shortly after the Earth was," Zoe said. "Maybe even at the same time. Judging by the unusual plant vegetation, and the primordial soup we saw yesterday. Other creatures obviously came here much later. It was luck

of the draw whether this ecosystem would be favored by them or not. Like this poor mammuthus. These creatures would not have stood a chance at survival. I mean, look at them. It's hot and balmy in here, and these mammoths would have been covered in thick fur. They're big and clumsy, and couldn't go into the denser forest, losing out on a lot of food they might have otherwise have benefitted from. They're more suited to the open plains. They didn't stand a chance."

"You think that's how it died?" Bryan said. "It starved to death?"

"Probably," Zoe said. "It couldn't have been due to lack of breeding partners. Look, there are more here."

Hidden amongst the foliage, wrapped and half-buried beneath the thick veins of vines, were half a dozen skeletons. Undergrowth grew out through the skulls and giant ribcages. A graveyard swallowed by the jungle.

Bryan noticed something about one of the ribcage bones. It'd snapped off and lay haphazard. He picked it up and placed it next to the ribcage bone it had snapped from. He held it the wrong way round. When he turned it over, it revealed a series of large holes on one side. Indentations, caused by a series of sharp objects. If Bryan didn't know any better, he would have thought they were bite marks. But bite marks from a pair of jaws unimaginably large.

There was a honking noise, causing Bryan to start and drop the bone on the ground. The sound came again, first deep, and then higher pitched, like a band was warming up.

"What was that?" Aaron said.

"I have no idea," Zoe said.

Zoe continued on through the jungle, heading toward the strange trumpeting sounds. The others followed in her wake, apprehensive, but intrigued. There was crashing and snapping, crunching like trees were being uprooted and thrown down. The ground shook beneath their feet. They slowed, crouching to keep their heads below the foliage's crown.

Bryan's mouth was dry. He couldn't swallow. After what he had seen at the side of the watering hole he wasn't sure he wanted to know what was causing the sounds.

"How about we just keep moving?" he said, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice.

"We should know what we're up against while we're here," Zoe said. "You can never know too much about your environment. Right, Aaron?"

"Right," Aaron said, though he didn't look excited about knowing either.

"Uh, guys…" Cassie said. "I think you should step back a minute."

"Why?" Zoe said.

They followed Cassie's eye line. She was looking at their feet. They were standing in a meter-wide recess. Bryan jumped out of it like it was about to bite him.

"Oh my God," Zoe said, realizing what it was. "Guys, do you know what we're standing in?"

She couldn't hide her childish glee.

"A puddle?" Aaron said.

"We're standing in a dinosaur footprint!" Zoe said.

When Aaron and Bryan looked at it more closely they could make out the round curves of the toes.

"*Dinosaurs?*" Bryan said, disbelieving. "I thought they were long gone."

"From the surface," Zoe said. "But evidently not down here."

Bryan peered at the jungle with new-found awareness.

"Listen, I saw Jurassic Park," he said. "And all the sequels. I don't much like the idea of being stuck in this jungle with them."

"It's all right," Zoe said. "This footprint is of a plant eater. They're harmless."

Zoe looked at the kids and frowned.

"You don't seem very surprised," she said.

Cassie shrugged.

“There’s old plants here, so why not old animals?” she said.

“Leave it out,” Aaron said. “What is it with you and always wanting to keep secrets? The reason we’re not surprised is because we saw a small dinosaur yesterday at the waterhole.”

“You saw one?” Zoe said. “And you didn’t tell us?”

“We thought you had enough to worry about already,” Aaron said.

Zoe frowned, unable to hide her annoyance.

The branches above them shook. Leaves drifted down like snow. Bryan looked up and caught the long thick neck of a creature high up in the trees, munching away. The glow bugs in the sky were directly above him, blinding him. The shape was just a silhouette.

Zoe lifted up a giant fir leaf and looked out at what lay before her. Her shoulders fell and she became still. The others drew up beside her and peered out at a great plain through the narrow slit of their foliage window, out onto another world. A true lost world.

# 48

THE CREATURES' SKIN was as green as the vegetation surrounding them, their heads small compared to their body size, flat and arrow-shaped, ending in a rounded beak. A darker green pattern ran over the top of their heads and down the back of their spines to the tip of their tails like a port wine stain. They bent down to nip at the shoots of a wide-brimmed plant with their grazing teeth. Others stood up on their hind legs to get at the juicy leaves at the top of the trees, revealing their gargantuan size.

"Wow," Aaron said.

None of them could think of a better word to describe the scene. The creatures looked CGI, they were so unreal.

Bryan worked some saliva into his mouth.

"What are these things?" he said.

"These are what they call iguanodons," Zoe said. "The first dinosaur to be discovered and recorded, in fact."

There was movement behind the great creatures, and more varieties of dinosaur than Zoe and Aaron could name emerged. There were parasaurolophus with the tall pipe-like protrusion on the top of their heads, and a small group of pachycephalosaurus with their thick domed craniums, and even an ankylosaurus with its clubbed tail. Bryan's heart swelled, amazed at the variety of life that could exist below the Earth's crust.

"I need to get closer and take some pictures," Zoe said. "Here, hold my bag."

"Zoe, wait," Bryan said. "It could be dangerous."

But she was already heading toward the giant creatures. The herd grazed silently, stripping the bushes clean of their leaves. A male iguanodon rose up onto his back legs and pushed against a tall tree with his front feet. The tree bent and snapped, crashing to the jungle floor. The iguanodon and his babies feasted on the juicy leaves.

A creature like that ought to be avoided at all costs, and there was Zoe, creeping up under a bush with her camera. She lay on the ground and snapped photographs through a small hole. He could imagine the words on her lips now: "This is amazing."

He agreed with her – it was amazing – but he'd prefer to be in a safari jeep surrounded by highly-trained hunters armed with the latest in technology should anything kick off. Instead, they were exposed.

One of the creatures came close to Zoe's location and sniffed at her with its nostrils – large enough for a man to put his fist inside. Zoe slowly raised her hand toward the great beast. She must have felt the hot air from its nostrils as she turned away from it. Zoe had a look of amazement on her face, like a child sat on the knee of Santa Claus at the local shopping center.

Then the animals stopped in their tracks. They all turned, necks arching toward the far side of the plain. The huge male iguanodon went up onto his hind legs and peered around at the vegetation around them, his senses heightened.

The hair on the back of Bryan's neck stood up on end. He peered around at the foliage. It looked calm, but that only made Bryan all the more wary.

The giant male became completely still, and then lowered his head to the food again. Bryan too relaxed. A beast of that size presumably had senses far beyond what Bryan possessed. If he was relaxed, so should Bryan be. But he wasn't, and just then, the edge of the foliage erupted, spilling forth a huge beast.

Bryan didn't get a good look at it. All he saw was a mouthful of sharp teeth, small yellow eyes, and black claws on the end of powerful legs.

"Let's go, let's go, let's go, let's go!" Bryan shouted.

The iguanodons were up on their feet in an instant, the babies *meh*ing pathetically as the adults wrapped their bodies around them and ushered them away. Bryan did the same with Aaron and Cassie, pulling them away. Zoe got to her feet and ran, racing behind Bryan.

The foliage behind them exploded beneath the weight of the huge beasts as they ran, panicked.

The T-Rex was a dirty brown color with a distinctive purple crest down its back, shaped like a flower in bloom. It took a step, and the whole world shook.

"Go, go, go, go, go!" Bryan shouted.

They ran, and the foliage broke and snapped behind them. Huge dinosaurs ran alongside them, bustling past. The ground shook as the trees hit the earth, and the family lost their footing and almost fell over. Birds hovered over the treetops, hissing and cawing at the dinosaurs trampling over their nests.

The iguanodons rushed past them, their bulky muscles slamming into the ground beside them. Zoe skidded to a halt and grabbed Cassie's hand, leading her underneath the iguanodon's legs.

The T-Rex leapt at the iguanodon and tore into its neck with its powerful jaws. The iguanodon honked in pain, stopped, and turned. But it wasn't beaten yet. It folded its front fingers into fists, and extended the long blade-like bone protruding from its thumbs like a mugger with a knife. It held its arms in tight and leaned back on its tail like a boxing kangaroo. The T-Rex was hesitant, moving left to right, looking for an opening.

*Meh!*

A baby iguanodon cried from one side. At some point it had lost contact with its mother. The T-Rex looked from the baby to the fully-grown adult. It turned and ran after the baby iguanodon. The adult relaxed, turned, and took off into the jungle. She did not try to rescue the baby. It was too risky.

A triceratops squawked behind Bryan. It was coming straight for him. Bryan smacked into Zoe with his shoulder, knocking her into Cassie, sending them rolling down a sharp incline strewn with leaves. Then Bryan grabbed Aaron and pulled him aside.

The triceratops whined again, and smashed through a slim tree with its horns. It attempted to skid to a halt, but was going too fast, and ran straight into a swamp. It was only up to its knees, but was sticky, and despite the dinosaur's huge muscles, it couldn't pull itself free. It wailed. Bryan felt sorry for it. Each movement seemed to pull the dinosaur deeper into its clutches. The triceratops emitted a haunted groan. As it sank it took its last breath, and a large bubble popped on the surface, like the swamp had digested the young dinosaur and burped with relish.

The other dinosaurs were gone, no doubt to safer climes. The jungle was silent once more.

"Are you all right?" Bryan said to Aaron.

"I'm okay," Aaron said, shaking with shock. "But where's Mom? And Cassie?"

"Hopefully somewhere safe," Bryan said. "Come on. Let's go find them."

# 49

WHY BRYAN HAD slammed into Zoe and Cassie, knocking them down the side of the sharp incline, Zoe couldn't fathom. He must have seen a danger she hadn't. Or maybe he just thought it was funny. She wrapped her arms around Cassie.

"We need to find your father and Aaron," Zoe said.

"What if we can't?" Cassie said.

"Then we'll head to the opposite side of the jungle, like we originally planned," Zoe said. "I'm sure that's where your father will head if he can't find us either."

Zoe began to scale the steep incline.

"Come on," she said. "The last time I saw them they were up here. Cassie?"

Cassie stood frozen, not moving a muscle.

"Cassie, come on," Zoe said.

Cassie let out a little squeak. Her whole body was shaking. Zoe walked down the incline and joined her. She froze, her heart in her throat.

Not five hundred yards away, standing there with blood around its broad lips was the T-Rex. Its small yellow eyes were fixed firmly on Cassie. Zoe's legs felt weak, like they might collapse beneath her any moment. History's greatest predator, and Cassie was having a staring competition with it.

The T-Rex stepped forward, and Zoe turned and ran, her hand clasping Cassie's tight. The T-Rex growled at the back of its throat and its footsteps crashed, shaking the world, and their souls. The ground was level here, with broad leaves covering it like a carpet. The T-Rex was gaining. Zoe could hear its breath exhaling through its nostrils.

The T-Rex slammed through the trees, knocking them over like they were twigs. It growled, lowered its open jaws, opening them wide, exposing its giant tongue.

Zoe and Cassie screamed.

The T-Rex's jaws slammed shut tight with a loud hollow snap, and its footsteps took it further on before it slowed to a stop and turned about, looking one way and then another for its missing prey.

Cassie sat wrapped in Zoe's arms, her eyes shut tight. Zoe stared at the wall of the hole they had fallen through, terrified, refusing to look to see where the T-Rex was or what it was doing. They were huddled in the corner, knowing that at any moment the T-Rex could lower its nostrils and find them, and they would be trapped and defenseless.

The T-Rex's footsteps slammed into the earth, getting louder and louder, each crash making Zoe and Cassie jump. Cassie whimpered. Zoe remained calm, though her heart was beating a mile a minute.

# 50

THEY HAD BEEN FLYING over the terrain for several hours, strafing over the canopy in undulating lines to cover every square inch, but so far they hadn't come across anything.

"We're running low on fuel," the pilot said. "We're going to need to turn back."

"All right," Rosetta said.

She was disappointed. She would have thought she would have seen something by now, but it was difficult to see much through the canopy, wide and broad like a second sky.

The helicopter turned sharply and headed back toward the fracking site, but as it did, something caught the corner of Rosetta's eye. It was a dark blot on the landscape, at odds with the vibrant greens and yellows of the native plants and trees in the area.

"Wait," Rosetta said. "Turn back. I saw something."

She was not prone to outbursts, and so the pilot did not argue with her.

"Which direction?" the pilot said.

"That way," Rosetta said, pointing. "South-southwest."

She kept her eyes on the direction she could have sworn she had seen something. The helicopter arched around. Rosetta's eyes scrubbed the forest. Where was it? But she couldn't make anything unusual out. The canopy broke like waves across the breakers at a dock.

And then Rosetta's breath caught. Her hand covered her mouth. Even the pilot, known for his unflusterability, sat up taller in his seat to look down at the huge crater spread out before them.

Hundreds of felled trees lay scattered like dominoes, the trunks and boughs bent over at an unnatural angle. The earth had been tossed up like a hastily-made salad, the brown of the soil overturned. It looked like a large bomb had gone off, except there were no burnt trees, no cinders or evidence of fire. Anyone walking along the ground would have thought it had been a landslide.

But from the air it was clear it could not possibly have been a landslide. The land did not slope down to this location, but was actually on a slight rise. It was a sinkhole. Bryan Angelo had sunk.

# 51

ROOOARRRRR!

The violent cry burst out over the jungle, made all the more terrifying by the fact it wasn't far away. Birds took flight from a dozen locations and cawed and hacked at something too large to attack.

Bryan grabbed Aaron and pulled him behind the shelter of a rock. He peered over it, eyes moving left to right. Then he ducked back down again.

"Is it there?" Aaron said.

"No," Bryan said. "But it's close."

"Where did they go?" Aaron said.

"I don't know," Bryan said.

His stomach twisted.

"Come on," he said. "We have to find them."

They retraced their steps, heading back the way they had come, both sets of eyes swiveling in their sockets. Their breaths and footsteps seemed loud in their ears. With the knowledge of dinosaurs and other prehistoric creatures in the jungle, the place took on a sinister edge. It was no longer a land of wonder, but of fear.

"What if we don't find them?" Aaron said.

"We will," Bryan said.

"What if we don't?" Aaron said.

"We will," Bryan said.

But he hoped to God they were still in one piece when they did find them.

# 52

EVEN STANDING ON Zoe's shoulders Cassie couldn't reach the top. The trap had been made for creatures far larger than themselves. The walls of the pit were sheer, dug by hand. Cassie could make out the shovel marks from the tools that had been used. There would have been no escape for them if it hadn't been for one fortunate twist of fate.

As the T-Rex had chased them it had knocked aside the trees, making them lean precariously over to one side. They hadn't been so courteous as to fall into the hole for them, but the vines in their upper reaches hung low, down through the middle of the pit. They were in reach, should Cassie and Zoe be able to perform a trick worthy of a circus act. Currently, Zoe and Cassie stood facing the wall.

"I'm going to turn around now," Zoe said.

She did so very slowly, making tiny shuffling movements. Cassie wobbled, waving her arms to keep balance. She leaned back against the dirt wall, focusing on the hanging vines. They were an imposing distance away. She reached out with one hand, keeping the other firmly on the wall, but she was nowhere near them.

"I'm going to take a step forward," Zoe said.

"No," Cassie said. "Don't. I can't do it."

"You can do it," Zoe said.

Sweat was already pouring down Zoe's face, her body shaking under Cassie's weight.

"I can't," Cassie said. "My balance isn't good."

"We'll take it slow," Zoe said. "Hey, relax. I'll catch you if you fall. And we can try again."

Cassie let out a deep breath.

"Okay," she said.

"Ready?" Zoe said. "Here we go."

She edged one foot forward, and then the other.

Cassie's shoulders were still touching the dirt wall. She pushed herself off it onto her elbows, but standing up straight on the shoulders of a moving person was an impossible task.

"No!" Cassie said, leaning back. "I can't! I'm never going to make it."

"You can do this," Zoe said. "You have to do it, otherwise we're never going to get out of here."

Cassie mumbled something to herself, something that sounded like a desperate plea.

"Wait," she said. "I just had an idea. What if I kind of fall forward?"

"What?" Zoe said.

"You take a few steps forward," Cassie said. "Then I'll jump and grab the vine. You would only need to take a few steps."

"You could fall and hurt yourself," Zoe said.

"If I try and do it this way, by balancing, I'll definitely hurt myself," Cassie said.

"Your father wouldn't be happy with this," Zoe said.

"Well, he's not here, is he?" Cassie said. "Please. Let's try it. It's our only chance."

"Okay," Zoe said uncertainly. "Ready?"

"Go," Cassie said.

Zoe took a deep breath, Cassie's weight forcing the air from her lungs. She took a step. She could already feel Cassie leaning forward, faster than Zoe was going. Zoe took two more hesitant steps and then felt Cassie bend her knees, preparing to spring. Zoe began to fall, lacking the strength to hold Cassie any longer. Cassie's shoes pushed against her, forcing her to the ground.

Cassie sailed through the air. It wasn't an impressive jump, but it was an accurate one. Her fingers snared the vines. They wrapped around her forearm and then tightened, drawing taut.

They caught her weight and swung her up in an arc.

"Yes!" Zoe said.

Cassie swung toward the edge of the pit. She reached for it with her foot, but didn't quite swing far enough. The vines swung in the opposite direction and this time she reached for the opposite side, but was even farther from making it.

"Swing!" Zoe said. "Swing back and forth! Build momentum!"

Cassie leaned back and forced her weight down, pushing the swing toward its apex. The tree leaned over dangerously, the trunk creaking under Cassie's swaying weight. No matter how hard she swung, Cassie couldn't seem to make the vines swing all the way to the other side. They were too short.

"I can't do it," Cassie said.

"It's okay," Zoe said. "How about you try to climb up the tree instead?"

Cassie looked up. It was a long climb, and climbing had never been her strong suit. Instead, she concentrated on swinging. She swung back and forth two more times. The branch groaned ominously, and at the apex of the swing, Cassie threw herself from the vines, and toward the edge of the pit. There was a snap behind her as the tree branch broke.

She had mistimed her jump, leaping too soon. Her stomach hit the pit's edge. She bounced off it. She began to slide back into the hole. Her hands scrabbled at the grass, twigs, and roots. Anything! She twisted her wrist, locking it tight. The roots caught, and she jolted to a stop. She waited a moment, catching her breath. Her legs dangled inside the pit.

She pulled herself up, one arm after the other, shaking. Her arms were burning, feeling like they were going to fall off.

"Are you all right up there?" Zoe said.

"I'm… I'm fine," Cassie said, regaining her breath.

When she was able, she got to her feet. She wrapped one end of a vine around a tree and tossed the other into the pit. Zoe climbed up and joined her.

"Well done," Zoe said, slapping her on the shoulder. "Now we just have to find Aaron and your father. I say we head back the way we came. I'm sure that's what your father will be doing. If we don't find them, we should head for the cliff face on the other side of the jungle like we originally planned. We'll meet your father and Aaron there."

But Cassie wasn't paying attention.

"Uh, Zoe," she said. "We've got company."

Zoe turned to find a group of short human-like figures. They had downy hair from head to foot, matching their dark eyes. Their arms were long and muscular, meant for climbing. Their legs were bandy and bow-legged, more ape than man. But there was an unmistakable intelligence in their eyes.

"They must have made this trap," Zoe said in a low voice.

"Do you think they're friendly?" Cassie said, not taking her eyes off them.

"If they're capable of advanced forethought like making traps they must be intelligent," Zoe said. "They might be able to help us."

One of the apemen approached them. He had a shard of metal protruding from his head. It was embedded at an angle, catching the light and winking at them, like a feather behind an ear of a Native American Indian. He had intelligent eyes, Zoe thought. They were a deep chestnut brown and ran over Zoe and Cassie with curiosity. In her mind, Zoe associated him as the leader.

The leader sniffed them, cautiously, and then prodded them with his long fingers. His skin was thick, dark and creased, like an ape's, his fur dirty and tangled with leaves and twigs.

"Hello," Zoe said.

The leader grunted. He took Zoe's hand and ran a thick sausage-like finger over it. He pulled on Cassie's arm to bring her down to his level. He looked closely at her face and eyes, fingers investigating her soft skin and long hair.

“Zoe…” Cassie said.

“It’s okay,” Zoe said. “Just let him explore you. It’s his way of saying hello.”

The leader did the same to Zoe, probing her. Then he turned to the other apemen and grunted at them. They stepped forward and poked and probed. Zoe smiled. She was interacting with their ancient ancestors, a dream amongst anthropologists.

Then the creatures grabbed their arms and legs, and lifted them off their feet. Zoe and Cassie lost their smiles.

“I thought you said they were friendly?” Cassie said.

“I’m new here too,” Zoe said. “How should I know?”

Zoe and Cassie screamed as the apemen carried them up a tree.

# 53

A SCREAM. A PAIR OF THEM. Bryan and Aaron's ears pricked up. They ran toward them, vaulting over hedges and ducking under low boughs.

"Woah!" Bryan said, skidding to a halt.

He was perched on the edge of a deep square hole. He waved his arms to keep himself from falling in. Aaron came barreling through the undergrowth. He didn't seem to notice the trap. Bryan grabbed Aaron's T-shirt. He hung over the side, looking down into the pit. Bryan pulled him back. Aaron landed on his backside.

"Thanks," he said.

"You're welcome," Bryan said.

"Do you think they fell into the trap?" Aaron said.

"I don't know," Bryan said. "Maybe."

"They screamed," Aaron said. "Where are they now?"

Bryan squinted at something on the other side of the trap.

"What's that?" he said.

He headed around the trap and knelt down. There were footprints in the shape of shoe soles, clearly Zoe and Cassie's boots. And surrounding them, dozens of bare feet.

"There must be a human tribe here somewhere," Aaron said.

"A tribe?" Bryan said.

He thought back to the footprint he and Zoe had discovered beside the lake.

"You would have thought we'd have seen something of them though, wouldn't you?" Aaron said.

Bryan wet his lips.

"Well, actually, we have," he said. "Your mother and I didn't want to worry you and Cassie, but at the lake we washed in yesterday we found a human-like footprint."

Aaron came to a stop.

"Why didn't you tell us?" he said.

"We didn't want to scare you," Bryan said.

Aaron frowned, shaking his head with obvious annoyance. Then he shrugged his shoulders. He smiled.

"You didn't want to scare us, and we didn't want to scare you about the dinosaurs," he said. "I suppose we're all just a bunch of scaredy cats."

Bryan chuckled.

"I suppose we are," he said. "But with dinosaurs running around, and acid lakes to contend with, I suppose we've got good reason to be."

"Are these like the footprints you saw around the lake?" Aaron said.

"I think so," Bryan said. "They must be. How many types of human could be here?"

They followed the prints, but they only led to a nearby tree.

"Where did they go?" Aaron said.

"I'd say they went up this tree," Bryan said.

They both peered up it, expecting a treehouse or some other abode, but nothing was there.

"Now what?" Bryan said.

Aaron crouched down to poke at some fallen leaves and broken twigs.

"I think they carried them away," he said.

"Carried them?" Bryan said. "Carried them where?"

"That's what we have to go figure out," Aaron said. "Come on."

# 54

THEY TOOK OFF AT A JOG, following the trail of falling leaves. They stopped and went back on themselves several times until Aaron was certain they were heading in the right direction. To Bryan it looked like a random collection of foliage, but to Aaron they told a story.

There was a honk from their right, and when they went to look what it was, found a herd of grazing dinosaurs. Maybe it was the same group as before. They had their heads down, munching.

They pressed on, the jungle unspooling before them, winding around giant trees and brightly colored flowers. Just when Bryan was about to give up and say they should head back to the trap, Aaron pulled a bush apart.

Before them was a settlement, a large village of furry inhabitants. The caves were ordered in a geometric pattern. Small mouse-like holes ran along the bottom of the cliff, and above them, approximately ten feet higher, were more holes. It looked like a block of Swiss cheese. Figures moved in and out of the caves like ants on an anthill.

A good number of the females carried babies, more like chimps, in their arms, playing with them, feeding them. A group of males hammered at flint, making it sharp and pointy. Others affixed them to long straight shafts of wood that other apemen were shaving from tree trunks. Bryan recognized what he was looking at. A factory processing line. They were making weapons.

There was hooting and growling as a group of apemen entered the village.

Bryan's heart rose into his throat. He recognized two of the figures immediately. They were being pushed along and cajoled by the village population. Bryan stood up, exposing himself to the apemen if they were to turn in his direction.

"Get down!" Aaron hissed.

"Your mother and Cassie need our help," Bryan said.

"We're not going to help them by getting ourselves captured!" Aaron said.

Bryan hesitated before sitting back down. Aaron peered out at the village. No one appeared to have noticed Bryan.

The apemen tossed Zoe and Cassie into one of the caves. A grated door slid down and slammed into place.

"We need to come up with an idea of how to rescue them," Bryan said. "Some way of springing them free from the village without any of the apemen knowing."

"My dad would know what to do," Aaron said.

"Unfortunately he's not here," Bryan said. "It's just you and me. We could cause a distraction, then run in and break them free. But it would need to be something big to keep them all busy."

The words froze on his tongue, his eyes glazing over with thought.

"You've got an idea?" Aaron said.

"Part of one," Bryan said. "But we'll have to wait until nightfall before we can execute it effectively."

"What do we do until then?" Aaron said.

"We wait," Bryan said.

# 55

THEIR COLD LEATHERY HANDS gripped tight and made red marks on Cassie and Zoe's soft skin. Their rough fur made them itch. The foliage slapped them across the face, leaving dark welts. Disorientated and out of breath, they were tossed to the ground before a large gang of apemen. They screamed and yelled, flashing out and smacking Zoe and Cassie across the body and legs. Their escorts halfheartedly kept the aggressors at bay before tossing Zoe and Cassie into a cell. The grated door slammed into place.

The apemen and women became quiet almost immediately, and returned to their previous chores, hobbling on awkward bowed legs.

Zoe hugged Cassie close.

"Are you all right?" she said.

"I've been better," Cassie said.

She smiled, causing her to flinch. She had a cut across one cheek. Zoe unshouldered her backpack and took out some water. She began to clean Cassie's face.

"I'm sorry for all this," Zoe said. "If I hadn't been determined to take photos, the stampede wouldn't have happened, we wouldn't have gotten split up, and we wouldn't be here."

"It's not your fault," Cassie said.

She hissed between her teeth as Zoe dabbed at her face.

"During all this we never really got to talk, did we?" Cassie said.

"With your face swollen like this, I don't think you'll be able to," Zoe said.

"I'll be all right," Cassie said. "How did you and Dad meet?"

"Are you sure you're going to listen to me this time?" Zoe said. "Last time you asked me that question you were busy painting your face with food."

"Sorry about that," Cassie said.

"I can understand why it's difficult for you to see your father getting close to another woman," Zoe said. "I get it. But you should get to know me a little. I'm not so bad."

Cassie shrugged.

"We met at work," Zoe said. "Your father needed research done on a series of potential new fracking sites. I was called in."

"Did you get on well right away?" Cassie said.

"No," Zoe said. "He represented the Man. I was determined for us not to get on well. It was a business relationship."

"When did you start liking him?" Cassie said.

"When he started opening up to me," Zoe said. "When he dropped his persona and showed me who he really was."

Cassie nodded, intrigued.

"I've heard about your mother from your father," Zoe said. "She was an amazing lady, going on all those trips by herself. I'm not sure I have the courage to do that. But you can talk to me, if you want. About womanly things – things you might not want to speak with your father about."

"I've got nothing to say," Cassie said.

"The offer's there," Zoe said.

She patted Cassie's face dry and added cream to her skin.

"I suppose there's one thing," Cassie said. "There's this boy I like. Clint. But I don't know if he really cares about me."

"Oh dear, boy trouble," Zoe said.

"Do you know much about it?" Cassie said.

“I think every woman knows a little about it,” Zoe said. “We all make mistakes when we’re young. But that’s the fun part of life. Don’t tell your dad I said that.”

Cassie smiled.

“Make mistakes,” Zoe said. “Just do your best not to make great big ones that you have to live with for the rest of your life. Go out with this boy, take it easy, and if you find you don’t like him, dump him and move on.”

“It’s not as easy as that,” Cassie said.

“Why isn’t it?” Zoe said. “You’re the woman. You’re the one in control. Never forget that. You only lose some control later when you decide to take the next step with a man. Then you share control, but you never surrender it. Those relationships where the man is in control are doomed to fail, and long in the past, thank God. Men were always the hunter-gatherers, not the decision makers. It was the women who made all the decisions.”

Cassie nodded to the apemen outside.

“Like them?” she said.

“No, not like them,” Zoe said.

“My mom was in control at home,” Cassie said.

“You see?” Zoe said. “It was the same in our house, though Aaron formed a stronger connection to his father than to me. You know, Aaron will probably kill me for telling you this, but he used to sit on the curb outside every night waiting for his father to return. It still makes me sad to think about that. A little boy waiting for his father to come home, only he never would. Then he has a chance to have a new father – yours – but he does everything he can to prevent it.”

“A lot of that is my fault,” Cassie said.

“Aaron’s old enough to make his own decisions,” Zoe said. “It was never just you. I never meant to replace your mother, you know. I just wanted to be a part of your life.”

Cassie didn’t say anything. The moment was charged. And yet she felt comfortable in Zoe’s presence, in a way she never was with her own mother or father.

“I was always lonely when Mom was away,” Cassie said. “Dad was busy at work. And though he tried to get back early to be with me, something always cropped up. Dad works hard for our benefit, I know. But I wish he could have been with me more when I was alone.”

“That’s not an excuse not to spend more time with you,” Zoe said. “He should know that. Especially when he’s the only parent.”

“The worst thing is not knowing,” Cassie said. “Not knowing if she was still alive or not, not knowing if she was safe. It’s so easy to fall over or get in trouble, and not be able to get back up.”

“Aaron feels the same about his father,” Zoe said. “He still believes he’s out there somewhere.”

“But you don’t think he is?” Cassie said.

“No,” Zoe said. “He’s gone and he’s never coming back.”

“I sometimes saw a tall woman, a shopper in a supermarket, or someone outside the school gates, with tawny brown hair, and I would think maybe… Maybe if she turns around it will be my mom,” Cassie said. “But it never was. Dad never saw anyone else for a long time. At least, I thought he didn’t. I thought he was going to end up being alone forever. I didn’t mind that he was seeing someone else, someone new. Actually, I was glad of it. But I didn’t like not being a part of his decision. I’m a part of his life too.”

“You are a part of it,” Zoe said. “The biggest part. If we couldn’t work things out with you kids on this trip we wouldn’t have continued with the relationship. We pretended to think we would have, but we both know the truth. It would have ended. It has ended.”

Cassie reached into her bag and took something out. It was a book.

“I keep one of her books with me at all times,” Cassie said.

“Can I take a look?” Zoe said.

The book was beaten, creased and worn, the pages a wonderful shade of yellow-brown. The front cover showed an image of a mother and daughter standing on the edge of a giant hole in the ground.

“It’s my favorite of my mom’s books,” Cassie said. “I always thought it would be me and her there, like on the front cover, on an adventure together.”

“Is it a sinkhole?” Zoe said.

“No,” Cassie said. “But it does look like one. It’s a post-apocalyptic novel, where a meteorite crashes into the earth and they have to work together to piece the world back together again.”

“Sounds exciting,” Zoe said.

“It is,” Cassie said. “I must have read it a dozen times. Mom would have loved this place. She would have loved all the dinosaurs, the jungle and even those monster apemen. I thought one day she might take me with her on one of her adventures. But that was just a pipe dream. The reason she went on her trips was to get away from me. To explore and do something exciting. She got itchy feet, Dad said. And when she came back she was always super excited. She brought the energy home, but after a few days, she would be sad again. I don’t think she ever wanted me. Not really. That’s why she ran away.”

“Don’t think like that,” Zoe said. “Of course she never felt that way.”

“Then why did she run away?” Cassie said.

“You don’t know what happened to her,” Zoe said. “She might have fallen over, hit her head and lost all her memories. It’s rare, but it happens.”

“She’s famous,” Cassie said. “Someone would have recognized her from one of the pictures in her books. She was on TV sometimes. Someone would have known who she was. I spent years looking for her online, sending out messages, asking if someone recognized her, but no one ever did.”

Zoe placed her hand on Cassie’s shoulder.

“Well, I’m not going anywhere,” she said. “Except out of this cell, if I get the chance.”

Outside, the apemen leader lay down with a pair of females picking through his fur. He dozed in the evening sun. One kept looking up at the metal shard protruding from his head. She reached up, hesitated, and then touched it. The leader’s eyes flashed open and he smacked the apeman aside, sending her sprawling across the ground. He beat her again and again. She screamed, but the other apemen only watched, keeping their eyes firmly fixed on their activities.

“So much for my theory that they must be smart peaceful creatures,” Zoe said.

“The good news is, the shard is killing him,” a voice said.

Zoe and Cassie shot to their feet and shuffled back, peering into the darkness. They picked up rocks from the floor.

A figure stepped from the shadows.

# 56

“I AM SORRY,” the boy said. “I did not mean to scare you.”

“Who are you?” Zoe said.

“I am Cawing Crow,” the boy said. “From the Lakota tribe.”

“Lakota?” Zoe said. “You’re a Native American Indian?”

“They are my ancestors, yes,” Cawing Crow said.

“Where are you from?” Zoe said.

“I am from a tribe in the jungle,” Cawing Crow said. “We were captured. Just like you.”

“‘We’?” Zoe said.

Cawing Crow gestured to the darkness behind him. A group of men stepped out of it, eyes on the floor. They were shaped like modern men. They were hairless, with broad chests and handsome bronze skin. Their hair was uniformly black and long, tied up into bobs at the nape of the neck. They had feathers in their hair.

“We mean you no harm,” Cawing Crow said.

“Why are you here?” Zoe said.

“We were out hunting when they caught us,” Cawing Crow said. “The jungle is becoming a hard place to find food. We must hunt farther. We keep trying to farm animals so there will always be enough food for everyone, but the apemen, they come and break our fences, take our food.”

“Why don’t you stop them?” Zoe said.

“We try,” Cawing Crow said. “But they are many more than us.”

“What will they do to us?” Zoe said, her voice shaking.

“They will take us to the rock on high and lay our heads down and smash in our skulls with a lump of wood,” Cawing Crow said. “If we are lucky.”

“And if we’re unlucky?” Zoe said.

“Fire,” Cawing Crow said. “And then they will cheer and hoot and scream. They are worse than the creatures in the jungle. Animals fight and kill to survive. These apemen fight for sport.”

Cawing Crow moved to the door, thereby moving closer to Zoe and Cassie. They shied back, but he didn’t seem to notice. He pointed through the grating at the apeman leader.

“He is Shard,” Cawing Crow said. “He is worse than the others. He enjoys killing us. Killing a dumb animal is no challenge. But fighting a man… That’s different. It requires intelligence and strength, and the apemen are very aggressive. The metal in Shard’s head lessens his ability to feel pain, and he seems stronger than the others, but he’s not. He just doesn’t feel the pain. But it will kill him. Eventually.”

“How did it get lodged in his head in the first place?” Zoe said.

“We had a battle with them, and it got stuck in his head,” Cawing Crow said. “Despite their appearance, they are smart. Too smart, sometimes. Too smart for me. We built these caves. But they came and took them from us.”

English was clearly Cawing Crow’s second language, and Zoe found him hard to follow.

“Could you take us to the far wall?” Zoe said.

“The far wall?” Cawing Crow said, frowning.

“In the north,” Zoe said, touching the cell’s stony wall and pointing.

“Yes,” Cawing Crow said. “We can take you. But how? We are in here.”

“We have something that will make these Stone Age critters more scared than they have ever been before,” Zoe said.

Cawing Crow beamed, and then turned to speak to his other tribe members.

“What are you doing?” Cassie said. “You don’t have anything to make them afraid.”

“I don’t,” Zoe said. “But you do.”

# 57

BRYAN DIDN'T TAKE his eyes off the prison where Zoe and Cassie were kept. Aaron weaved reeds together into a long chain. They'd sat in silence for over an hour. Each time Bryan tried to speak something seemed to interrupt him. Really, it was only his nerves stopping him.

"I never wanted to replace your father, you know," Bryan said. "From what I hear about him, he was-"

"Is," Aaron said.

"-is a decent guy, interesting to be around," Bryan said. "I'm not like him. I don't pretend to be. I can never – and would never – attempt to replace him. I just wanted to be someone you can talk to from time to time about things, if you wanted. Your father and I aren't similar, but we do have one thing in common: a love for your mother. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. You're her son and I would have loved you too. I know it wouldn't have been easy, but we would have been a family."

Bryan let out a sigh. It sounded rehearsed. It *was* rehearsed. And now he'd said it he wasn't sure he was glad he had.

"You're not in love with Mom any more?" Aaron said.

Bryan looked toward the apemen's caves, where he knew Zoe to be.

"I love her more than I can express," Bryan said.

"Why?" Aaron said. "Are you bad with words?"

"What?" Bryan said. "No. It's just an expression. I don't know how Zoe feels about me any more, that's all. I don't want to love someone who doesn't love me. Not again."

"I'm sorry we tried to break you up," Aaron said. "Cassie…"

He shook his head.

"We thought you would both be better off without each other," Aaron said. "Without us."

"Cassie can be a force of nature sometimes," Bryan said. "I get that. But in a few minutes we're going to attempt a rescue of Cassie and Zoe, and I don't know how it's going to go. That's why I said what I did before. Just in case."

Aaron didn't need to ask what he meant. He understood. A pause filled the void between them.

"How did you start your business?" Aaron said.

"Oh, the usual way," Bryan said. "I saw an opportunity and took it."

"What opportunity?" Aaron said.

"A lucrative one," Bryan said. "In oil. After that, I diversified and never stopped growing."

"Must take some balls," Aaron said. "Doing something like that."

"It's no different than what we're going to do tonight," Bryan said. "It's a calculated risk. Once you've done the risk assessment, come up with a plan of attack, all you can do then is pull the trigger. What about you? What's your dream?"

"My dream?" Aaron said, cheeks coloring. "I don't really have any."

"Sure you do," Bryan said. "Everyone has a dream, even if they're not quite sure what it is yet."

Aaron looked at Bryan, weighing him up.

"I want to be a scientist," he said.

"A scientist?" Bryan said. "What's wrong with that? Some of the greatest people in history were scientists."

"I know," Aaron said. "But it's not a cool job like being a singer or actor."

"Listen to me," Bryan said. "Being a scientist, helping people and making the world a better place, is ten times better than prancing around on a stage for a living. Or being in board meetings

all day."

Aaron smiled.

"Thanks," he said.

"It's the truth," Bryan said.

There was activity in the apemen village. The children had been put away and a group were piling up wood.

"Looks like they're about to do something," Bryan said. "We'd better get going."

Bryan felt nervous. This was the most dangerous thing he had ever done. He wiped his hands on his pants. He pulled down some vines from a tree and wound it around into a wide circle.

# 58

NIGHT HAD DRAPED over the apemen village when they came to the cell. It took a dozen apemen to lift the door up. The Native American Indians were under Cawing Crow's orders not to struggle, and they obliged, though they glared at the apemen and pulled away their arms when touched.

Zoe kept her fist clenched. They had pulled half a dozen fireworks apart and extracted the gunpowder. There was little inside it, but a handful was enough for what they needed. The rest of the fireworks were kept in their original packaging.

The apemen led the prisoners to a huge pile of wood. Shard sat before it, working hard at something. Zoe couldn't quite see what it was. Then, when he moved aside, she saw a spark. It caught and spread across the wood. It was a pyre. She doubted it was for a funeral. The apemen stood around them in a circle, faces lit up like grotesque masks.

Shard stood before the roaring fire, the light glinting off his metal crown. He grunted and moaned, directing himself at a wall behind Zoe. She looked over her shoulder. The wall had a large tarpaulin draped over it and showed a handsome man with chiseled features on his knees with an apeman standing over him with a gun. The picture was torn across the top and bottom. Zoe recognized it for what it was: a poster for a Planet of the Apes film. In the current setting it worked as a piece of propaganda. Zoe would have burst out laughing if the situation wasn't so tragic.

Looking at the two species now, Zoe was struck by how different they appeared. The apemen had thick hair over their whole bodies, the Indians, hairless. The apeman walked with an awkward bowlegged gait that looked forced, the Indians' legs were long and strong, good for running.

The apemen bared their large canine teeth and hissed and growled at their captives. Strength was the sign of power here, not intelligence. Zoe wondered how they'd managed to emerge from such beginnings.

The female apemen came forward, their fur covered with a white powder. They danced around the fire.

Zoe's heart beat loud in her ears. Cassie's body shook too, but there was a confident cast to her eyes that Zoe admired.

Shard marched up and down, jutting out his muscular chest and hammering the ground with his powerful forearms. The other apemen screamed.

Zoe clenched her fist tight and prepared to toss the powder into the fire, sensing the moment approaching. Cassie slipped the fireworks down her sleeve and prepared to do likewise.

Then the rocks on the ground jittered, hopping up and down across the surface. The apemen stopped screaming and watched them. They shared confused expressions. They hooted and roared and whimpered, not knowing what was happening.

The trees that ran up to the rocky outcrop shivered and shook, bending and buckling like a wrecking ball was knocking through them. Then came the moans and roars of huge beasts.

A few apemen exploded from the foliage, running hell for leather for the caves in their lumbering gait. They screamed in fear. The apes closer to the caves turned and ran for the safety of their homes.

"Get behind me!" Cawing Crow said.

"What?" Zoe said. "What is it?"

The foliage exploded like a tin can, huge monsters spilling forth. They were dinosaurs, eyes wide and broad and white with fear. They ran toward the wall, their footing uncertain on the hard slippery rocky surface. They slammed into the wall, bouncing off it, sliding along it, leaving a streak of blood against its rough surface, before taking off along the barren path and sinking

back into the jungle. Some of the less fortunate apemen were crushed underfoot by the giant beasts.

Zoe heard a voice:

“Zoe! Cass! Come here! Quick!”

Bryan and Aaron waved from the edge of the jungle.

Zoe turned to the Natives.

“Come on!” she said.

They ran down the incline, as fast as their legs could carry them. Zoe swept Aaron up in her arms, forgetting how heavy he was, and smothered him with kisses. Bryan did the same with Cassie.

“How did you do this?” Zoe said.

“Just a little wrangling,” Bryan said. “I did it all the time on a farm when I was young. With bulls, of course, not dinosaurs.”

The Natives looked at Bryan, and then averted their gaze.

“Who are they?” Bryan said.

“Friends,” Zoe said. “They were going to help us get away before you rudely interrupted.”

“Sorry!” Bryan said.

The apemen emerged from their caves, the dinosaur stampede having vacated. Shard was not amused. He grunted and raised his arm. The apemen bolted forward, picking up spears without breaking step, and tore down the incline.

“I think that’s our cue to leave,” Bryan said.

“Agreed,” Zoe said.

They turned and ran.

# 59

THE NATIVES' SPEED was astonishing. They ran, leapt and hurdled over the obstacles as if they were a playground. Cawing Crow slowed when he noticed Zoe and the others falling behind. He made a whooping sound and the other Natives drew alongside them. Then Cawing Crow made a gesture with his hands and two Natives slowed further and disappeared into the jungle behind him.

Zoe wanted to tell them not to risk their lives, but she couldn't spare the breath.

The jungle was alive with the cries of the beasts of the night, howling and growling and flashing white eyes. Zoe tripped and landed flat on her face. A black snake rose and pulled its head back to bite. A Native seized the snake under its jaw, spun it around, and threw it high into the tree canopy. Zoe's heart thumped like the beating of a war drum.

There were growls and screams from the treetops, like animals provoked in a zoo.

Cawing Crow looked at two more Natives and, never breaking stride, made a sharp movement with his hand. The two warriors broke off and peeled away.

After a moment there were loud howls and roars, shouts and bellows. But the roars quickly absorbed the howls, and the sounds grew silent. The jungle ended and their feet came to soft sand. They were at the side of a large lake.

"Great!" Bryan said. "Now we're trapped!"

Cawing Crow and the other Natives ran to a thick clutch of reeds and pulled out a pair of canoes.

The roars and grunts grew louder from the jungle, the darkness and its hidden dangers mawing open. The apemen threw themselves from the treetops and rolled into running positions on the sand.

Cassie's eyes widened and she pointed at something behind Zoe.

"Zoe, look out!" she said.

A shape moved in Zoe's peripheral vision.

Zoe dived aside as a giant snake snapped at her heels. It missed and struck the ground instead. The snake shook its head, dazed. Zoe backed away and picked up a stick, keeping her eyes firmly on the snake. The snake snapped at her again, but Zoe brought the stick across and smacked the snake aside the head.

The snake shot forward again, this time seizing the stick. It wrenched it from Zoe, tensed its muscles, and snapped the stick in half, jutting out like vampire fangs. It spat the stick remnants out and drew itself up taller, its slit of a mouth seeming to smile at Zoe. She knew she was done for. Its tongue, as thick as her arm, lolled out of its mouth and quivered in the air. The snake peeled back its thick lips and its six-inch fangs protruded.

The Natives hooted and threw themselves at the snake.

"Get in the boat!" Cawing Crow said. "Quick!"

The family did, hopping on board. Most of the Natives escaped the snake. One had his foot ensnared in a snake's coil. The snake wrapped another coil around the Native, watching him with its dead black eyes. The warrior beat at the snake's huge muscles, to no use.

The Natives pushed away from the bank and paddled away.

"Wait!" Zoe said. "The warrior! We have to save him!"

"He's already dead," Cawing Crow said.

The canoes pulled further across the lake. The apemen hurled spears at the canoes, a couple connecting, but none doing permanent damage. The metal in Shard's head glinted with glow bug moonlight. They stood there watching as the canoes pulled away.

"Stab the warrior, please," Zoe said under her breath. "Show mercy."

But Shard and the other apemen only watched as the snake enveloped the warrior with its thick muscular coils, and then tensed its body. There were a series of pops as the man's bones were snapped in two dozen places.

None of the Natives reacted.

Zoe shivered. It had nothing to do with the cold.

# 60

"IT'S POSSIBLE they might still be alive," a seismologist from the fracking site said. "They could be trapped in a pocket of air beneath the surface."

"How long do you think they have?" Rosetta said.

"Two days," the seismologist said. "At the most."

Rosetta had reassigned all staff from the fracking site to digging duty. She had also sent for as many Angelo Industries employees as she could find. They turned up by car and bus, each ready for a day of hard digging. They got to work straight away, hacking at the earth and piling it up to one side. There were two dozen diggers. Nowhere near enough, but it was a start.

They dug by hand with shovels and picks, otherwise risking chopping the family members in half. Rosetta only knew too well what it was like to lose a limb and she wished it upon no one.

When word got out that the CEO of Angelo Industries had been buried by a sinkhole, the locals from Lakota went into their garden sheds for their own digging equipment and asked where they should dig. Bryan Angelo had brought stability to the area, an area that usually relied mainly on tourism for income.

A shout went up from the far side of the sinkhole. Rosetta held her breath. Murmurings from the other diggers as they paused to see what was happening. The digger, caked in mud, brought Rosetta what he'd found. It was a few items of clothing, still in perfect condition, if a little dirty. They were smaller than an adult's clothes, and though Rosetta didn't know Aaron Tate's wardrobe, she would have bet good money it belonged to him.

"Thank you," Rosetta said.

The worker nodded and returned to digging. Some of the other diggers left their plots and joined the man who had made the discovery. The sinkhole had shifted the earth, twirling it around, and there was no reason to suspect the family would be in the same place this clothing was found, but they continued to dig there anyway.

Simeon, the local baker, discovered a body, but it had been decomposing for at least a dozen years. The police were called in to remove it. Hopefully it would be the only death to come from this site.

When darkness came they installed lamps. Those in town who could not dig brought food for the diggers. They were all united by this one goal. They were owed a happy ending.

By morning, and a whole night of digging, the locals climbed out of the pit. They were covered head to foot in dirt, their fingernails black. Rosetta thanked them, despite having found nothing. The locals went home to sleep the rest of the day. Those from the city still had a long drive back.

There had been a dozen minor injuries and twice as many blackouts. And for all their effort they had found nothing. Nothing but a few pieces of clothing and camping equipment.

The sun was just beginning to rise over the horizon when they switched off the lamps. There was a chill, and one hundred plumes of mist billowed from the diggers' mouths and evaporated. There was just the hollow sound of pickaxes smacking against hard rock, and shovels crunching into the earth.

*Bryan, where are you?*

# 61

THE GENTLE SWAYING of the canoe had lulled Zoe to the fringes of a deep sleep. She still had the gunpowder clenched tight in her hand – now a hard ball of condensed powder. She tucked it in her pocket. On the seat opposite her, Cassie and Aaron leaned against one another, fast asleep. A smile came to Zoe's lips before she too fell asleep.

# 62

ZOE STARTED AWAKE, prodded by Cawing Crow. She yawned and stretched, and joined Bryan and the others as they were led into the jungle. The last thing she needed right then was another trek. Her eyes were heavy, and she could barely keep them open. She lost track of time, and after what felt like ten minutes, but could have been much longer, they came to a stop. Zoe leaned against a tree and felt herself falling asleep again.

Again, Cawing Crow prodded her, and she wanted to shout at him, to tell him to leave her alone and let her get some sleep, but she didn't have the energy. Cawing Crow led the family up the tree using crude handholds nailed into the bark. Zoe's muscles ached with the effort, but she was barely even aware of it.

They entered a room. Cawing Crow gestured to a bowl and a cloth that Zoe supposed was meant to be a towel, and then at the large square of blankets on the floor in the corner. A bed. A real bed. It was the most beautiful thing Zoe had ever seen. She and the others stumbled toward it and fell on top of it, not bothered that it wasn't big enough for all four of them. They lay atop one another, and just slept.

# 63

SUNLIGHT FILTERED through the gaps in the walls and made constellations on the floor. The sounds of the jungle were especially loud here, the birds singing jubilantly.

Zoe sat up, her muscles aching, her bones popping. Her body felt lethargic and tired like she'd run a marathon. She got to her feet, hobbling toward the wash basin and splashing herself with cold water, letting it soak into her consciousness. She dried herself with the towel.

She turned to the others, still fast asleep. Zoe poked Bryan in the ribs. He grunted, snuffled, and then opened his eyes. He sat up and stretched.

"What time is it?" Bryan said.

"I don't know," Zoe said. "Late morning, I guess. Or afternoon."

Bryan peered around at their room with heavy lidded eyes.

"Where are we?" he said.

"No idea," Zoe said. "I remember climbing a tree last night, but that's about it."

Bryan shook his head. He didn't remember a thing.

"Do you remember rescuing Cassie and me?" Zoe said.

"It rings a bell," Bryan said.

"Thank you for coming to rescue us – so heroically too," Zoe said.

Bryan shrugged.

"Someone had to save the maidens in distress," he said.

"We had a plan, but I don't know if it would have worked out," Zoe said.

Bryan put his hands on her shoulders. They were strong, but gentle. Zoe had never noticed how big his hands were before.

"Don't think about it," Bryan said. "You're safe now, and we're going to keep it that way."

"How did you manage to herd that many dinosaurs at the apeman village?" Zoe said.

"I used to work on a farm remember," Bryan said. "I spent my summers wrangling large bulls. If you can jump out at an animal, especially when its sleeping and at rest, it'll react without even thinking. They run in the opposite direction to wherever they were scared. Luckily they were grazing nearby."

"My hero," Zoe said.

There were more groans and grunts from the bed as Cassie and Aaron sat up, and then flopped back down.

There was a tentative rapping on the door. Bryan stiffened. No one came in.

"Hello?" Zoe said.

Cawing Crow poked his head inside.

"Ah," he said. "You're awake. I knocked earlier, but you were still asleep."

Cawing Crow was more handsome than Cassie had realized. He had bronzed skin, a twinkle in his eye, and a kind smile that no doubt made him popular with the ladies.

"Are you hungry?" Cawing Crow said.

Zoe's stomach grumbled in response. She was so hungry she'd forgotten she was starving.

Cawing Crow stepped outside and said something in a foreign language, and then came back inside. He took out a wrapped leaf, tied together with a root. He handed it to Zoe.

"For your pains," he said, pointing to Zoe's arm where she had purple bruises.

"Thank you," Zoe said.

She took the bottle and moved to Cassie. She began applying the poultice to Cassie's arm first. The apemen had left dark marks on both their arms. Zoe touched them tenderly, but Cassie still flinched.

Bryan clearly felt awkward in the young man's presence. He turned to Cawing Crow.

“What’s going on around here?” he said. “Why did the apemen want to kill you?”

“It’s a long story,” Cawing Crow said. “We have been fighting many years. They killed many of us.”

“How many of you are there?” Bryan said.

“Not many,” Cawing Crow said. “A few hundred.”

There had been thousands of apemen the night they were to be sacrificed. No wonder the Natives feared for their lives.

Someone stopped at the door and spoke to Cawing Crow. He turned to the family.

“They are ready for you now,” he said.

“‘They’ who?” Bryan said.

“The village,” Cawing Crow said with a smile.

# 64

CAWING CROW stepped out first, onto a narrow walkway that wrapped around the tree. On a level par with them, nestled in the branches of other trees, were dozens of small huts like the one they had just emerged out of. They were quaint, with straw rooves and mud walls. The family wrapped their hands around the railing and noticed hundreds of black-haired people on the ground in front of them. The Natives raised one hand and beamed with big smiles.

"They certainly look happy to see us," Bryan said.

"Er, Mom," Aaron said. "What's going on?"

"I have no idea," Zoe said.

An old man with a deeply creased face approached them. He wore a big headdress of feathers and dinosaur teeth. He hugged each of them in turn. He said something they couldn't understand.

"Welcome," Cawing Crow said, translating for him.

"We thank you for coming to us today," the Chief said. "It has been over two and a half thousand suns since you were last here."

Zoe did the math in her head.

"Seven years," she said.

"You have met, battled and beaten the apemen who threaten us," the Chief said. "Already we receive good omens. In the long days that come, you will lead us to great victory. Though our members are not many, our strength and spirit are strong. Come, join us and feast on our bounty."

The family exchanged uneasy glances. *Lead? Victory?* They were all beginning to feel sick to the stomach.

The table was stuffed full with food. The meat glistened with grease, and though Zoe was a vegetarian, it looked mesmerizing even to her. The vegetables were large, some cooked, others left raw. There were birds, giant eggs, and bowls of fruit – many Zoe had never seen before.

The family sat down, ready to dig in. They looked up. The locals stood around, watching with great interest.

"Have they eaten?" Zoe said. "I don't want to eat their food."

"We have much food," Cawing Crow said. "We are mighty hunters."

"We should be selling tickets," Bryan said.

The family dug in, not even stopping for air. They hadn't eaten much besides a little fruit and raw vegetables the past couple of days. The tribespeople chatted amongst themselves as the family ate, pointing at each of them, slapping one another on the back.

The Chief of the tribe sidled up close to them.

"Tell me, do our ancestors still ride the Great Plains and hunt the buffalo?" he said, via Cawing Crow.

Zoe looked from him to Cawing Crow and then back again.

"Do your stories have anything to do with white men?" she said.

The Chief shook his head.

"Only that our ancestors hunted the Great Plains on majestic horses," he said.

Zoe nodded, and then smiled.

"Yes," she said. "They ride the Great Plains to this day."

The Chief grinned ear to ear. He raised his voice and the tribe roared with delight.

"They must be a wonderful sight," he said.

"They are," Zoe said.

She pushed her plate aside. She suddenly didn't feel very hungry. When the others had finished, the Chief clapped his hands, and the Natives carried the food away. But something was

nagging at Zoe.

“Cawing Crow,” she said. “None of the other tribespeople can speak English. How is it you can?”

“It is my duty to learn,” Cawing Crow said. “One day I will become Chief. Besides, I studied even after they went.”

“They went?” Zoe said with a frown. “After who went?”

“Smoking Stick and Gentle Teacher,” Cawing Crow said. “The other white people.”

# 65

THE NATIVE VILLAGE was wide and sprawling, their homes on the very fringes of the jungle, but already the Natives were hard at work on a more permanent structure. The Native American Indians smiled at the family as they passed, and then bent back down over the stones and doorways they were chiseling into the rock. Trees grew, weakened, and collapsed. Stone had none of these detriments.

Zoe paused, turning to look back over the jungle. They were on a slight rise and she could see over the whole canopy. On the opposite wall were the grey cracks of the place where they had begun their journey, spat out and almost crushed by the sinkhole. She was surprised to find they had arrived where they had intended.

*HONK!*

Zoe started, leaping back, as a hadrosaur with a large rock in its front paws approached the caves and set it down. There was a man on the dinosaur's back, sitting in a saddle, pulling on the reins.

Aaron's mouth flapped open.

"We're living in the Flintstones," Bryan said.

"Very industrious," Zoe said. She turned to Cawing Crow. "Do your people often dig deep traps to capture dinosaurs?"

"Yes," Cawing Crow said. "All over the jungle. They're difficult creatures to catch. Why?"

"I think we fell into one yesterday," Zoe said.

Cawing Crow's expression turned ashen.

"I am very sorry," he said. "I will order for our traps to be covered and to never make them again."

"No, it's all right," Zoe said. "We managed to get out. In fact, it's thanks to the trap we survived an attack from a T-Rex."

Cawing Crow smiled.

"Good, then," he said. "The T-Rex. Besides the apemen he is our greatest enemy."

"How can you live here?" Zoe said.

"What other choice do we have?" Cawing Crow said.

Zoe nodded. You made the most of what you were dealt.

"I wanted to thank you for saying what you did before," Cawing Crow said. "To my father."

"Saying what?" Zoe said.

"About our ancestors still living on the Great Plains," Cawing Crow said.

Zoe eyed him.

"You know the truth?" she said.

"I do," Cawing Crow said.

"But you lie to your father and the others?" Zoe said.

"We're never going to leave here," Cawing Crow said. "Except by death. Why lie to them? Let them dream of the greatness of our ancestors. It doesn't harm anyone."

There was a rumbling deep within the Earth. The Natives rushed to the wall and crowded around a hole. There was a mighty crash and dirt and other detritus spilled across the ground. The rumbling stopped and the Natives began picking through the dirt, coming out with various items; a comb, a set of broken plates, a dog bed, a post with Japanese writing on it, a dozen plastic bottles.

"Gifts from above," Cawing Crow said.

The Natives piled the useful items up to one side, and then cleared away the dirt. A young girl picked up the comb and slid a width of her dress through the teeth, wearing it like a brooch. Zoe

smiled, approached the girl, and took the comb off. She ran it through her hair. The girl, taken aback, took the comb back, shrugged, and slipped it through her dress again.

“I guess she prefers her own usage,” Bryan said.

Half a dozen lumps lay before the wall with broad leaves wrapped around them. It was obvious what they were without needing to look under them.

“You went back for them?” Zoe said.

“They are our brothers,” Cawing Crow said.

“I’m sorry your men died to save us,” Zoe said.

“They died well,” Cawing Crow said. “They would have been happy.”

Something caught Zoe’s eye on the wall, a series of beautiful images carved into the stone. It stretched along the wall and into a cave.

“We recorded our history so we would never forget,” Cawing Crow said. “Would you like to hear it?”

“Oh yes,” Zoe said. “We most certainly would.”

# 66

“THE DAY OUR ANCESTORS ARRIVED, they were hunted by many strange and dangerous creatures. They sought safety in the trees, high up, but even those places weren’t safe. Then one day they discovered another race of man. He’d been here a long time already. He was hairy, strong, perfectly adapted for tree living. At the beginning they were friendly, sharing their food and offering protection when other creatures attacked them. In thanks, our ancestors taught these apemen how to make weapons, prepare food for the future, and how to set traps. We built caves for us all to live inside, together, and live out our days in comfort and safety.

“But then the apemen grew jealous of our abilities. They knew everything we did, but they had one disadvantage: their hands are not the same as ours. Their thumbs would not allow them to do some things, like tie knots or work complex tools. The apemen grew angry, feeling inferior. An apeman cares very much about honor and respect, and this was too much for them to bear. There were still far more apemen than our ancestors, and so they chased them away, back out into the wilderness of the jungle. But by then our ancestors had learned how to survive.

“And they prospered, using their superior knowledge of traps and weapons. But the apemen, still jealous, never able to come to terms with the fact there were things we could do that they could not, attacked us, again and again, never letting up, and for hundreds of years this is how we have lived. We would grow stronger, and the apemen would come, destroy everything we had built, murdering our families and children until we became small enough in number not to be a threat, and they would leave.

“Things would have continued like that forever if it wasn’t for a pair of strangers who came from the jungle one day. The man wore the same clothes as you, spoke the same language. Communication was difficult at first. Eventually we understood, they were from another world, and they got stuck down here somehow. We’d always seen items come to us, sent from our ancestors, we believed. We thought these strangers had been sent to protect us against the apemen. But the man told me what our true history was. How our ancestors had been broken by the white man, made poor and weak. I told no one this story.

“We were out hunting one day when the white man, armed only with a black stick, killed a dinosaur – from a long distance, with just one shot! We called him Smoking Stick, and he became our greatest warrior. The apemen came to investigate the noise, and when they attacked, he shot at them, stopping them in their tracks, and they turned and ran away, afraid. They returned a few days later, this time with an army, but with Smoking Stick on our side, the apemen were terrified, and we beat them back. That was when we killed their leader and Shard became the new leader. He got his name from a shard of metal from one of Smoking Stick’s knives lodged in his head. It was the greatest victory we ever had.

“When we were not fighting, Gentle Teacher, the white woman, taught us how to speak English, taught us math and science. I took to English very quickly, and became obsessed with it, using it every moment I could. We thought they were demons sent to protect and educate us.”

“Angels,” Cassie said. “Angels, not demons.”

Cawing Crow smiled.

“Angels do not kill the way they did,” he said. “They were demons. But Smoking Stick said they could not stay with us for long, and they left. After a few weeks, the apemen returned, and finding the white man gone, they attacked us again, this time with an anger we had never seen before. Some feared they would do what they always threatened to do before: wipe us out for good. But they didn’t. They were held back by Shard, who did not want to lose his sport.”

Zoe poked at the drawing on the wall of the white man and woman with her finger.

“Do you know anything else about Smoking Stick?” Zoe said. “Like where he came from?”

“Of course,” Cawing Crow said. “We still have his home here.”

# 67

"SMOKING STICK came with this cabin when he arrived," Cawing Crow said. "It took some effort to bring it here."

The cabin was modern-looking, at odds with the Natives and their caves. It was shaded by thick overhanging boughs like the embracing arms of a jealous lover, the vines wrapped tight. Little flowers grew in the damp crevices in the window frames. Moss spread over the walls like wallpaper. A rusted snow mobile sat outside it.

Zoe put her hand to the cabin's outer wall. It was metal, manufactured in a factory up on the surface somewhere. Cawing Crow opened the door and stepped inside. Books were piled up on a table. They had adventurous titles.

"I come here sometimes by myself," Cawing Crow said. "To think and study."

The cabin was built for frigid temperatures. Stepping inside brought an instant sheen to their foreheads. The heat was close and muggy. Aaron ran an eye over the interior, but it had been stripped of all useful living items, leaving just the shell.

"This is where he stayed, isn't it?" Aaron said. "This is where he stayed in the Arctic."

Zoe didn't know what to say. She just swallowed. Then she nodded.

"I think so, yes," she said.

She was numb. She couldn't believe this was happening. Here, of all places.

"He's alive," Aaron said, eyes shimmering with tears. "I didn't really think… He's alive!"

Bryan and Cassie watched from the doorframe.

"He could still be here," Aaron said.

"Cawing Crow said he left," Zoe said.

Her voice felt like it was coming from someone else.

"But we could find him!" Aaron said.

"Aaron…" Zoe said.

"We could find him!" Aaron said.

Bryan stayed back, aware this wasn't a place he should be at the moment.

"We *have* to find him!" Aaron said.

He turned to Cawing Crow.

"Tell me," Aaron said. "Tell me everything about him."

"I already have," Cawing Crow said. "He wasn't here long."

Aaron ran through the door, blustering past Bryan and Cassie.

"Aaron!" Zoe said.

"Let him go," Bryan said. "I'm sure the Natives will keep an eye on him."

Zoe turned away, wiped her hands over her eyes and face, straightening her hair and skirt. She turned back to Cawing Crow.

"You said George, uh, Smoking Stick came here with a woman," she said. "Are you sure they came together?"

"Yes," Cawing Crow said. "They were a couple."

Zoe frowned, not sure what to make of that.

"We live in fear, in the jungle, waiting for Smoking Stick to come rescue us again," Cawing Crow said. "Instead, he sent you."

"No one sent us," Bryan said. "We're not warriors. We're normal people."

"But you will help us," Cawing Crow said. "You must."

"We came here to find a way out," Bryan said. "There was no divine plan. We just want to leave."

Cawing Crow looked from Bryan to Zoe and back again. His eyes fell.

“I’m sorry,” Zoe said. “I… We can’t deal with this right now. I just need… We need to…” Zoe bent over. Her breakfast spilled over the floor in a wet slop.

# 68

ZOE SAT on a branch that protruded from a tree trunk, her legs dangling like a child who'd been chastised, eyes on the ground. She'd never looked so beaten before.

Bryan had left her alone the past couple of hours to go through everything in her mind. He was afraid of what her decision would be involving him and Cassie. Having your ex-husband come back from the grave wasn't likely to be conducive to new relationships.

"How are you holding up?" Bryan said.

Zoe started, unaware he was there. She didn't say anything.

"It must come as quite a shock," Bryan said.

"You're telling me," Zoe said. "It still hasn't quite sunk in yet."

"It'll take some getting used to," Bryan said.

"You spend years certain of something, knowing it in your heart, and you don't have to worry or think about it anymore because no matter what happens, you know it will never change," Zoe said. "And then something like this happens."

She shook her head.

"I don't know what to think any more," she said.

"I suppose it's a bigger shock to Aaron," Bryan said.

"Not really," Zoe said. "He was always convinced his father was still alive. Now he has proof he is. Or was."

They sat in silence for a moment.

"I suppose the main question is, does this change anything?" Bryan said.

"Sorry?" Zoe said.

"Does knowing your husband was alive here seven years ago change anything about your life?" Bryan said.

Zoe thought for a moment.

"No," she said. "I suppose not."

"I realize this isn't the best time," Bryan said, "but what does this mean for us?"

Zoe looked at him.

"I… I don't know," she said.

"Are we still together?" Bryan said.

"Of course we are," Zoe said. "It's just… a bit of a shock, that's all. It might not even have been him here. It might have been someone else. And who was the woman he was with? What am I supposed to make of that? Oh, I don't know. I'm so confused right now."

Bryan wrapped his arm around her. She leaned her head on his chest. They sat in silence, listening to the prehistoric world around them. So long as Bryan could enjoy moments like this with Zoe, he was happy.

# 69

AARON SAT on a rock in almost the same position as Zoe. His head was bowed down, chin on his curled fist, staring into space. Cassie came to him, making noises to alert him of her approach. She needn't have bothered. He didn't look up at her anyway.

"Can I sit here?" Cassie said.

Aaron didn't say anything. Cassie sat down. They listened to the wind as it strummed the leaves.

"Strange, having all these people watching your every move, isn't it?" Cassie said.

"I'd have thought you'd be used to it," Aaron said. "Being so popular at school."

"You don't think it's possible to be in a crowd of people and not feel alone?" Cassie said.

"I suppose," Aaron said.

Silence again.

"I thought he was alive," Aaron said. "I was convinced of it. I told Mom I believed he was. I told everyone who would listen. They probably thought I was crazy."

"I did," Cassie said.

"I thought I believed it," Aaron said. "But now I know he was alive and well here seven years ago, I'm not sure I ever really did believe it. Does that make sense? To tell everyone you believe something when you really don't?"

"You wanted it to be true," Cassie said. "You wanted to believe he was still around. I think everyone could understand that. Do you think he's still out there somewhere?"

"Yes," Aaron said. "But if I saw him, I'm not sure I would recognize him. All I can really remember is what Mom told me. I only know his face because I've seen his photo so many times. I don't remember what he looks like, not from my own memories."

"The same with my mom," Cassie said. "I've seen her picture in the 'About the Author' section of her books so many times I'm surprised I haven't worn them out. I could draw her face perfectly. But if she came to me now, I'm not sure I would recognize her."

Aaron looked up.

"I have to find him," he said. "I have to find my father."

"We will," Cassie said. "But not here. Not now. But we will. Together."

Aaron looked at Cassie, and a smile spread across his face. It was the smile of someone grateful not to be alone.

Cassie hopped down from the rock.

"Come on," she said. "Our parents will be waiting for us."

They walked along the well-beaten path toward the floating Native village.

"I wonder how he got out of here," Aaron said.

"I asked Cawing Crow that question earlier," Cassie said.

"What did he say?" Aaron said.

"He said he went through the Passage," Cassie said.

"The Passage?" Aaron said. "What's that?"

# 70

THE PASSAGE was a wide crack in the sheer cliff face. There was a low rushing sound, like wind. Aaron thought he felt a slight draft, sucking the heat from him. He looked down and saw a dozen small leaves skitter across the ground, toward the crack. They were sucked into it and then sailed upwards on an invisible draft.

Zoe, Bryan and Cawing Crow approached.

"Hey," Zoe said.

"Hey," Aaron said.

They stood beside one another, not more than a few inches apart. Unsure how to act, how the other might react.

"Are you all right?" Zoe said.

"I'm fine," Aaron said.

"Good," Zoe said.

"This is the Passage," Cawing Crow said, filling in the silence. "It's where we put our dead."

"Why put them through here?" Bryan said.

"Because it's the only way out of here," Cawing Crow said. "We believe it takes our dead onto the next world."

"Has anyone ever returned from it?" Bryan said.

"No," Cawing Crow said. "When they leave, they never come back."

A pair of Natives approached the first prostrate body wrapped in broad leaves, delicately lifted it, and carried it over to the crack. They gently placed it standing up in front of the gap and took a moment to apply some war paint to the corpse's face.

"Now what are they doing?" Zoe said.

"Preparing the bodies for when they return," Cawing Crow said. "We hope they will be reborn strong warriors to help us defeat the apemen."

The Natives pushed the body into the gap. The air howled as the passage was blocked. The leaf casing flapped and sucked close to the Native's lifeless body. The wind grew stronger and pulled the body up and away. The Natives moved onto preparing the next body.

"We'd better get our things," Bryan said.

"Your things?" Cawing Crow said.

"We're leaving," Bryan said.

Cawing Crow blinked like he'd been slapped.

"Leaving?" he said. "Now?"

"Yes," Bryan said. "We've got lives to be getting on with."

"But you're supposed to help us defeat the apemen," Cawing Crow said.

"How can we help?" Bryan said. "We know nothing about fighting or defense. You'll be better off without us."

"But my people will be expecting you to lead us," Cawing Crow said.

"Against an army of marauding apemen?" Bryan said. "We wouldn't stand a chance."

*Awoooooooo!*

The blast came from one of the taller trees. A man waved his arms and then cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted something.

"What is he saying?" Zoe said.

Cawing Crow turned pale.

"Apemen," he said. "The apemen are here."

# 71

THE NATIVES rushed with purpose, each drilled and trained with where they should go and what they should do in the event of an apeman attack. Bryan hastened toward the tree where they had slept the night.

"How long before they're here?" Zoe said.

"Twenty minutes," Cawing Crow said. "Maybe less."

"I'll get our bags," Bryan said, reaching for the ladder.

"Bryan, wait," Zoe said. "These people need our help."

"*We* need our help," Bryan said. "We need to get out of here."

Zoe didn't move. Neither did Aaron or Cassie.

"Cassie, come on," Bryan said.

"I'm staying," Cassie said.

Bryan clenched his teeth.

"No you're not, young lady," he said. "You're coming with me. You all are. You're not dying here. Not now. Not after everything we've been through."

"We might win," Zoe said.

"We won't win," Bryan said. "Look at these people. Armed with sticks and stones. Look, if we had more time to prepare… Maybe. But we don't. The apemen are going to overrun these people and I don't intend on being here when they do. Do you?"

The others didn't react. Bryan sighed and then spoke in a softer tone.

"We don't have any guns or modern weapons," he said. "Nothing to shift the odds in our favor. We shouldn't even be involved in their war. We came here to find a way out. That's all."

"Things have changed," Zoe said.

"This isn't our fight," Bryan said. "We should get out of here."

"They saved us," Zoe said.

"And we should die for them?" Bryan said. "I care only about you, Cassie and Aaron. Please. Let's just go."

Bryan turned to Cawing Crow.

"You don't need us," he said. "We can't use blowpipes or bows and arrows. We have nothing here to protect you with."

"We only need to see you," Cawing Crow said. "To know you are here with us. Fighting with us. It will strengthen our spirit."

"If we leave, will the apemen leave you alone?" Zoe said.

"No," Cawing Crow said. "They will punish us. Perhaps for the last time."

Silence followed. They all knew what that meant.

"I'm staying," Zoe said firmly.

"Me too," Cassie said.

"Tell me," Bryan said, "how do we help fight when we have nothing to do it with?"

"We do have weapons," Zoe said.

"What?" Bryan said.

"We have the most powerful weapon in the world," Zoe said, tapping her head. "Our brains. And you just happen to be one of the best strategists in the world."

"In the boardroom," Bryan said.

"Are war and business so different?" Zoe said.

"Of course they are!" Bryan said. He turned to Aaron. "Aaron, help me out here."

But Aaron had the same cast to his eye as the girls. Bryan locked eyes with Cassie and then Zoe.

“But…” he said.

His shoulders slumped. He was outnumbered.

“Fine,” he said. “But when this battle turns against us – and it will – I want all of you ready to run into the Passage at a moment’s notice. Understood?”

They nodded. Cawing Crow beamed.

“Then, you’ll fight with us?” he said.

“Yes,” Bryan said. “Fantastic. Let’s die for no good reason.”

He pointed to the dinosaurs with the saddles and harnesses.

“Do these things have armor?” he said. “Weapons?”

“They’re not fighting animals,” Cawing Crow said. “They’re work animals.”

“Work animals,” Bryan said flatly. “You haven’t got any vicious trained carnivores we can unleash around here, by any chance?”

“No,” Cawing Crow said.

“I thought not,” Bryan said. “Get me your best dinosaur riders.”

Cawing Crow ran off and spoke to another Native. They took off in different directions.

“What are you doing?” Zoe said.

“Something probably very stupid,” Bryan said. “A stampede worked before with the apemen. There’s no reason to suppose it won’t work again.”

“But there aren’t any dinosaurs around here,” Zoe said.

“That’s why we’re going to have to go find them,” Bryan said. “In the meantime, you need to keep the apemen distracted. You said you had a plan to escape before I heroically saved you at the apeman village?”

“Yes,” Zoe said.

“Do it,” Bryan said. “Whatever it was. Slow the apemen down. Our only chance to beat them is to hold them back until we can get the dinosaur stampede to trample over them. Get the Natives to tell you where the traps they made are. We don’t have time to make our own, but we can use the ones they already have.”

Zoe leapt forward and kissed Bryan full on the lips. Cassie and Aaron turned away in mock disgust, making puking motions.

Zoe leaned her forehead against Bryan.

“I don’t need to think,” she said. “I choose you. No matter whether we find George or not. He might not have died seven years ago, but he is dead to me now. You’re the man I want to spend the rest of my life with.”

Bryan squeezed Zoe’s hands between his own. His hands shook, he was so relieved.

“Thank you,” Bryan said. “I needed to hear that. I love you.”

Zoe beamed. It was the first time he had said that to her. Her lip quivered. Bryan brushed it with his thumb.

“Make sure to stay in one gorgeous piece,” Bryan said. “All of you. I have something to set up before I give the wranglers a hand. Cassie, you do what Zoe says. Capiche?”

Cassie saluted.

Bryan took off his backpack and ran into the cave entrance the Natives had been working on.

“Where’s he going?” Aaron said.

“Don’t worry about Bryan,” Zoe said. “He knows what he’s doing. Now, let’s get to our position.”

“Where’s that?” Cassie said.

“The front, of course,” Zoe said.

# 72

ZOE, CASSIE AND AARON stood beside the Chief and his warriors on a hill that looked down over the jungle. The Chief nodded to them. The Natives wore bright war paint on their bodies and faces. They held spears and shields in their muscular hands. They glanced at Zoe, Cassie and Aaron every few seconds. Zoe noticed the warriors grew an inch taller, their resolve enhanced.

Zoe knew they weren't going to be much use in the fight, weren't going to take down many of the apemen, if any, but to these people, they were a symbol. The Natives would fight and hold their own, and even if they failed, it didn't matter. They would try their best. They would no longer live beneath the heel of their violent oppressors. And for that, Zoe was glad she could be of use.

"Where are the women?" Zoe said.

The Chief didn't understand. Zoe pointed at herself and Cassie, and then shrugged her shoulders. The Chief pointed to his weapon and crossed his arms. Women don't fight. It was a ridiculous sentiment. With doom on their doorstep they needed all the warriors they could find.

"You stay here," Zoe said to Cassie and Aaron.

"Why?" Aaron said. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to get the women to help me lead some of the apemen into the traps like Bryan said," Zoe said. "I hate to admit it, but it's a good idea."

"I'll help," Aaron said.

"You stay here," Zoe said. "They need to see you. You're the spitting image of your father. They know that. Take this."

Zoe handed Aaron the box of matches.

"Make sure to run the moment you light those fireworks," she said.

"We will," Cassie said.

Zoe ran a loving finger along Aaron and Cassie's cheeks.

"I love you," she said. "Both of you. Be careful."

She took off.

"So, it's left to us to hold the line," Cassie said. "Typical."

# 73

BRYAN CAME RUNNING out of the cave, having set up his hasty plan. It would likely have only a small effect, but if it slowed the apemen down it would be worth it.

The Native riders ran up the dinosaurs' tails and hopped into their saddles with a dexterity Bryan would never have believed. Even with Cawing Crow's help he struggled into his own saddle. Bryan was sat halfway up the neck of a brown hadrosaur. *This is one to tell the grandkids*, he thought.

They snapped their leads, causing the dinosaurs to bolt forward. Bryan almost fell out of his saddle. The hadrosaur beneath him was incredibly powerful. He followed the other riders into the jungle at a jog. Bryan bumped up and down like Kermit the Frog. His crotch was already sore. *Maybe I won't be able to tell the grandkids after all.*

# 74

THE HUTS were suspended high in the tree canopies. They were of a uniform size, a single room like the one they had woken up in. Zoe's eyes scrubbed each one until she came to a hut about four times the size of the others, nestled between the boughs of two trees. Zoe marched toward the ladder.

She had assumed the village would need a communal room, somewhere for the village elders to gather and discuss important issues, for important events like marriage to be hosted. Logic suggested it would also be where the women would hide. At least, that was her theory.

Zoe got to the top of the ladder and crossed to the front door. There were no windows to peer through. She pushed the door open.

The Native women sat huddled along the walls, holding babies and children on their laps. They all looked up. One of the women smiled kindly and led Zoe toward an empty space to sit down.

"What?" Zoe said. "No. I didn't come here to hide."

She stood before the women, and realized perhaps this wasn't the best idea after all. How was she going to communicate with them?

"Uh…" Zoe said. "We have to fight. All of us. The warriors aren't enough."

Blank expressions. Zoe mimed fighting, playing the part of the apemen as well as the Natives.

"We *all* fight," Zoe said, pointing to them.

The Natives shared confused expressions.

"If the apemen get through they'll slaughter all of you anyway," Zoe said. "It's better to fight them. Work together."

She waved her hands for the others to follow her outside, but none moved.

"One of you must understand what I'm trying to say," Zoe said.

But none did. Except perhaps one girl who had her head tilted to one side. She was pretty, about Cassie's age. She stepped forward and stood beside Zoe. She began to speak, and though Zoe didn't understand what she was saying, the other women shook their heads. The young girl spoke louder, with greater passion, speaking to several women individually. The opinion makers. A few heads stopped shaking. Some even nodded. Everyone seemed most interested in a greying old woman sat at the back of the room. They cleared a space so she could see Zoe and the young girl. There was a pause, the silence ringing and loud after all the discussions.

The old woman nodded. The young woman's voice rose again. She took hold of Zoe's hand and lifted it above their heads. A small roar of acceptance came from some of the women's throats. Those who cheered handed their children to the old and infirm, who would remain.

"Thank you," Zoe said to the young woman.

The woman said something back, but Zoe didn't know what it meant.

Zoe took off her backpack and sat it on the floor. She took out her camera and hung it around her neck. She turned to the outspoken young girl.

"My name Zoe," Zoe said, resorting to broken English. "Zoe. What your name?"

"Honovi," the girl said.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Honovi," Zoe said. "I hope I didn't just get you and your friends killed."

They climbed down the ladder.

# 75

THE APEMEN EMERGED from the tree line and formed scruffy ranks across the flat grassland that buffered the jungle and the Natives' tree village. They each carried a spear and a sharpened flint knife. The Natives were armed the same, though their tools were forged with greater care.

Shard stepped forward from the army, a long sword in his hands. He was the only apeman with a Native-crafted weapon. He raised it above his head. The apemen roared and hissed, bearing their sharp incisors. The sun glinted off the metal crown in Shard's head. He aimed his sword at the Natives, and then roared. The apemen leapt forward, beating the earth with their fists.

Then a loud voice beckoned, echoing over the flatland, like the voice of God.

The apemen slowed their advance, to a stop. The voice was speaking in English, but the echo was bad and even Zoe and Aaron couldn't make out what the voice was saying.

"What is that?" Cassie said.

Aaron listened carefully. A smile spread across his face.

"It's Jurassic World," he said. "Bryan put a movie on!"

"Dad's watching a movie?" Cassie said. "During a battle? I'll kill him!"

The voice drifted away, to silence. And then a loud roar, deep and terrifying, boomed from the caves.

The apemen took a few steps back. Shard shouted, and the apemen stopped, holding their ground. Their eyes scanned the jungle both behind and in front of them, looking for the beast.

The Chief peered around. He too was spooked. He gave orders for some of the men to guard their rear, and they began to move away.

"No!" Aaron said.

He waved his hands to calm the Chief.

"It's nothing," he said. "It's a trick. It's a movie. There's no real dinosaur."

Aaron grabbed a warrior's arm and pulled him back to his original position. The Chief pointed in the direction of the dinosaur roar and then at Aaron.

"Yes," Aaron said. "We made the roaring sound."

The Chief smiled and nodded. He gave another order, and the warriors returned to their original positions. The Chief said something, and the warriors laughed.

Then came a loud roar from somewhere deep in the jungle.

"That doesn't sound like it's from the movie," Cassie said.

"It's not," Aaron said. "A dinosaur must have heard the roar from the movie. He thinks he's being challenged."

"What use is that to us?" Cassie said.

"It's not," Aaron said. "I'm sure Bryan just meant to scare the apemen. It looks like it's working."

The apemen looked at one another, fearful. Another roar echoed up from the cave. They only heard a dangerous carnivore on the side of the Natives. They took small steps back. Shard screamed, and beat some of the apemen over the head. The apemen began to edge forward again, eyes firmly on the treetops.

The Chief pointed at the apemen, who were still skittish about going forward, and bellowed the command to attack.

# 76

CAWING CROW pressed the foliage aside to reveal grazing herbivores concentrating on the grass shoots at their feet. Bryan was nervous. Last time he had simply scared the herd, and they had run in the direction they needed. But these dinosaurs were farther from the village and needed to be corralled through the dense jungle. It required a riding and wrangling skill far superior to his. Hopefully the Native riders would be up to it.

"What do you want to do?" Cawing Crow said.

"Sneak around them and come at them from behind," Bryan said, "and then scare them this way, toward your village, and crush the apemen."

Bryan explained the details of the plan to Cawing Crow, careful to leave himself out of the main driving activities. A dinosaur was much more powerful than a horse and he would only mess everything up if he made the attempt. The secret to good leadership was knowing your own strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of the other members of your team.

"Let's do it," Bryan said.

# 77

ZOE AND HONOVI waved their arms and shouted at the left-hand flank of the apeman army.

"Hey!" Zoe shouted. "Over here! Over here!"

Half a dozen apemen paused, spotting the women. They broke formation and ran toward them. The apemen growled and held up their spears. They screamed as they drew closer, so close Zoe could make out their bloodshot eyes and hairy nostrils. But the women did not move, holding their ground. When the apemen were just a few yards away the ground gave way beneath them and they fell into the trap, their bodies entangled at the bottom of the pit.

The Native women hooted with triumph. Another group of apemen spotted the Native women and broke away from the main body.

"Where's the next trap?" Zoe said.

Honovi led them into the jungle. The undergrowth snapped beneath their feet, the shrubbery clawing at their clothes.

Honovi put a hand to Zoe's chest, stopping her. She pointed to a jumble of leaves on the jungle floor. The Native women edged around it like there was an invisible force shield. Zoe hoped Honovi's memory was up to scratch. It looked like a regular section of jungle to her.

This time the women held their spears out with both hands and watched as shadows danced through the tree trunks. They snorted like wild animals. The spear in Zoe's hand felt like a toothpick.

The apemen screamed from the tree line, running at the women, spear tips raised. They fell through the trap, down into a hole twenty feet deep. They scrabbled at the walls but found no purchase.

"Yes!" Zoe said.

She raised her hand in a high five, but Honovi didn't know how to respond, so she copied Zoe and held up her hand. Zoe slapped Honovi's palm. Honovi stared at her palm, confused by the action.

There was a grunt from the jungle as a large apeman emerged at the edge of the clearing. He puffed and panted under his breath. He looked at the apemen in the trap, and then at Zoe and the Natives. He grunted in satisfaction with a smile on his lips. He edged around the trap. The women ran in the opposite direction. He sped up, and so did they.

Finally, the beast stepped back and leapt over the trap to the other side, within feet of the women. He raised his arms to smack Zoe, who tripped. The apeman found only air. He raised his huge forearms to bring down on her. Zoe fumbled for her camera and hit the button. The light flashed, and the beast shook his head, smacking at his face with his club-like hands trying to dispel the black spots in his vision.

Zoe wanted to turn and run, but they weren't going to be able to outrun him. Not in the jungle. Instead, she turned and leapt at him, throwing her weight against him, feet first, knocking him back. But he was big and strong, and Zoe's weight wasn't enough to knock him into the hole.

A spear thrust into the apeman's chest, pushing him back an extra few inches. The apeman gripped the spear and pulled on it. Honovi let go. The apeman's eyes went wide. He hadn't expected that. He fell back into the pit, landing on the other trapped apemen.

"Thank you," Zoe said.

Honovi nodded.

*BOOM!*

Honovi started at the explosion and the flashes of multicolored light erupting from the main battlefield. The blood drained from Zoe's face.

# 78

THE WARRIORS swung their homemade tomahawks with speed and grace, parrying with their shields, on the offensive. The apemen relied on their strength, hacking at the Natives like they were tree trunks. The warriors countered them easily, capable of delivering killing blows but were blocked by other apemen, overwhelming them with their superior numbers.

“They’re breaking on the left,” Aaron said. “We need to do something.”

Aaron and Cassie ran toward the break in the defensive line. When they were a hundred yards out, Cassie stabbed a firework into a mound of earth and aimed it at a ninety-degree angle at the apemen.

“Light the fuse!” Cassie said. “Quick!”

Aaron struck a match, but it was doubted by a passing warrior, who hurled himself at the apemen. Aaron tossed it and lit another. This time the fuse lit. It hissed.

Aaron covered his ears as the fuse shrank. It disappeared, seeming to fizzle out at the base of the firework. Then the rocket shot forward, whistling loud like a crow with its tail on fire, spraying a shower of sparks as it struck an apeman on the chest, then dove into the ground and exploded in a myriad of colors.

The apemen screamed like their close cousins the apes. The closest received severe burns, their fur scorched away, crisp, glowing golden, their pale pink skin visible underneath. They threw down their spears and ran away. Not many, but a few.

Warriors rushed forward to plug the gap, strengthening the left. The apemen looked hesitantly at one another before hissing, their lips pulling back from their canines. They dashed forward with their weapons raised once again.

They paused, slowing, as the ground beneath their feet began to tremble.

Cassie looked up. She smiled and pointed at an approaching dust cloud in the middle distance.

“Dad’s coming!” she said. “He’s bringing the dinosaurs!”

# 79

THE FOLIAGE exploded, shredded by four-foot horns and broad feet. A huge herd of herbivores knocked trees aside like blades of grass. And right ahead of them, held back between the tree lines by the Natives, the apeman army, the trap they lay in only now dawning on them, inside a funnel that made their death unavoidable.

The Native riders raised their arms high in the air, hooting in impending victory.

Just then, for reasons Bryan couldn't explain, the lead dinosaurs suddenly pulled left, heading back toward the jungle.

"No!" Bryan shouted. "On the left! Pull them back! Pull them back!"

The riders rushed forward, but were buffeted aside by the unflinching wave of dinosaurs. That surprised Bryan. Normally grazing animals wouldn't have done anything but what the wranglers had directed them to. But then, these were dinosaurs. There was no way of knowing how they would react.

"Shall we get them back?" Cawing Crow said.

"No," Bryan said. "It's over."

The time it would take to corral them back at the apemen was unfeasible. And they would have lost the element of surprise. Bryan could see Shard now, a victorious sneer on his face. Bryan hated him with an intensity he could hardly explain.

"Give me your spear," he said.

Cawing Crow handed it over. Bryan heeled his hadrosaur and drove it toward Shard. He could hear the thudding footsteps of the other riders on either side of him.

Shard and his largest soldiers took position at their army's right flank, preparing to deal with the hadrosaur charge head-on. Bryan's fierce frown gave way to an expression of realization. He pulled his hadrosaur to a stop.

A purple crest poked above the tree tops on the outer edge of the jungle. The sinister black claws stepped forward and emerged from the tree line. The sharp teeth opened wide and let out a roar so loud the glow bug sun dimmed, and the world became dark.

The apemen turned to face this new aggressor, their eyes widening in fear. They rushed forward, back, but always away, from the terrifying T-Rex as it stepped over them, crushing them underfoot and lowering its teeth to those who attempted to run, snapping its jaws around them, severing them in half at the waist, tearing off legs and tossing them aside like toothpicks. The apemen screamed in pain, in death, in terror, their disordered ranks becoming chaos.

Only one apeman did not turn and run. Only one held his ground. The only apeman impervious to fear and pain, and deaf to the word of instinct. He ran forward, pulled his arm back, and threw his spear. It sailed through the air and struck the T-Rex in the eye.

The T-Rex reared up, roaring in pain and anger with the force of a thousand lions at the artificial sky. The world dimmed again, like an eclipse, purging the world into darkness.

Shard reached for a fallen spear, pulled his arm back, and waited for the light to fade up so he could blind the T-Rex in the other eye too.

And then the light did fade back up.

Shard's eyes widened.

The T-Rex's nostrils were so close that when they snorted, the air knocked Shard onto his back. The T-Rex stepped forward and snapped his jaws around the apeman leader.

Shard didn't make a sound, and only beat at the T-Rex with his fists. The T-Rex bit down hard. Shard exploded in a spray of blood. The T-Rex shook his head side to side. Shard's limbs flew like confetti.

The remaining forces of both armies retreated: the apemen into the jungle, the Natives into their treehouses. The T-Rex gorged itself on the fallen bodies of the battlefield.

# 80

BRYAN HOPPED off his hadrosaur. Zoe, Aaron and Cassie ran to him. They hugged one another. Against the odds, they had survived.

"Bet you're glad I brought my laptop now, huh?" Bryan said.

Zoe pressed her lips together and screwed up her face.

"I'm sorry I was so hard on you for checking your emails," she said. "A little."

"You were right to be," Bryan said. "A little."

"I thought you weren't the hero type?" Zoe said.

"I'm not," Bryan said. "Just an average guy doing anything to protect his family."

"Hm," Zoe said. "You're right. Doesn't sound very heroic at all."

# 81

THAT NIGHT, the Natives partied in celebration of their victory over the apemen. All knew that so long as the apemen existed they would have something to fear. But for the moment they could live in peace. They prayed the apemen might next time select a more peaceful leader.

A vigilant watch kept a close eye on the jungle should the apemen attempt a stealth attack. The T-Rex had disposed of most of the dead and left the rest to rot. The Natives were quick to collect the bodies, both Native and apeman, and wrap them in broad leaves as per their tradition.

In the midst of the celebration the family slipped away, collected their backpacks, and crept to the Passage.

"It seems wrong not to say goodbye," Cassie said.

"If we try to say goodbye they might never let us go," Bryan said.

"We should take one last photo," Zoe said.

She set the camera up with a timer and posed beside the Passage. The light blinked the final few seconds and then flashed.

"There's one thing I don't understand," Aaron said. "If Dad went through this Passage and returned home, why didn't he come back to us?"

"He might have returned anywhere in the world," Zoe said. "Who knows where the other end of this Passage might be. It could be anywhere. It could lead into the middle of a mountain or a prison cell for all we know."

"That's something to look forward to," Bryan said.

"You're leaving?"

They turned to find Cawing Crow watching them. He wore a garland of flowers around his neck. His eyes were sad.

"It's time for us to go," Zoe said.

Cawing Crow nodded.

"I understand," he said.

"You could come with us," Zoe said.

"I belong here," Cawing Crow said. "We all do. Besides, my time to go through the Passage will come. Maybe one day I'll see you in the next world."

"I almost forgot," Cassie said, taking off her backpack.

She took out a book and handed it to Cawing Crow. His eyes widened in surprise.

"It's not much," Cassie said. "I noticed you have a small collection in the cabin."

Cawing Crow wrapped his arms around Cassie.

"Thank you," he said. "It's the best present you could give me."

Aaron sidled up to Cassie.

"Where was the advantage in that?" he said.

"What do you mean?" Cassie said.

"I thought you liked using people?" Aaron said. "What you just did looks suspiciously like charity."

Cassie shrugged.

"Sometimes it's nice to help people," she said.

Bryan stood before the Passage.

"This is it," he said.

"Here we are," Zoe said.

"Are we sure we want to go through?" Cassie said.

"Once we do, we can never come back," Bryan said.

"Do you think Dad will be on the other side waiting for us?" Aaron said.

“Maybe,” Zoe said.

Cassie took Bryan’s hand.

“Let’s go home,” she said.

“Stand back,” Bryan said.

He shut his eyes and stepped into the Passage. He rose up, and then stopped as he blocked the tunnel. The pressure built up and he accelerated, clearing the blockage.

“Your turn, Cassie,” Zoe said.

“You first, bro,” Cassie said to Aaron.

“I thought you didn’t want us calling each other that?” Aaron said.

“It’s what we’re going to be now, isn’t it?” Cassie said. “Bro and sis. We might as well get used to it. As well as the gales of laughter mocking us.”

“Thanks,” Aaron said. “I think.”

He took a step into the wind. It sucked him through with ease. Cassie waved to Cawing Crow, and then entered the Passage. She too was small enough not to cause a blockage and flew upward.

Zoe stepped forward. She stopped, turned, and looked back at the beautiful vista, of a world she would never see again. She checked the weight of her backpack. At least she had her photos.

She held her fingers to the Passage’s updraft. It was soft and warm, and she felt a slight sting from the dirt, but it wasn’t unpleasant. The air pulled on her gently, not like the maelstrom that had brought her here. Breathing in deep and closing her eyes, she stepped into the sinkhole. She got lodged there for a moment, and then felt the air build in pressure. She shot up through the tunnel.

# 82

THE AIR rushed around her, forcing her up like a cork out of a bottle. The journey was straight and direct. She imagined herself flying out of Old Faithful, a hundred feet into the air, watched by a handful of tourists. She tried not to think of the landing.

She struck something soft and spongy. She reached up to touch it and found it was mud. She lifted her face out of it, but the wind howled and forced her deeper into it.

*I'm going to suffocate.*

She turned her face to the side and took a deep breath. The mud covered her head, shoulders, and then her arms, hips, legs and toes. She tried to move her arms, but it was like moving through treacle.

*So this is how it ends, after everything we've been through.*

Was this how George went? The reason he hadn't returned to them? And yet Zoe held onto her breath, making every last molecule of oxygen count, clinging to hope like a drowning man to a life preserver.

Then her head burst through the top. She instantly felt cold as she was ejected from the mud and into a more viscous solution. Some of the liquid slipped between her lips, and she realized it was water. Salt water. She opened her eyes. She was floating in darkness. Her legs were still coming out of the mud, slowly.

She kicked her feet before they were even fully out, and headed toward what she assumed was the surface. She kicked and dug at the water, the pressure relieving itself the higher she went. Life bubbled from her lips as she dug deep and produced the final burst of speed she was capable of. Her lungs burnt, and she had to breathe. She had to open her mouth and…

Breathe.

She burst through the water's surface and gasped a deep mouthful of air. She tossed her head around until she found one of the figures she was looking for.

"The coast!" Bryan said. "Zoe! Swim toward the coast!"

Aaron and Cassie were already emerging, crawling out of the sea on their hands and knees. They were on the fringe of visibility, partly concealed by a shroud of thick fog. Bryan and Zoe pulled up alongside them, collapsing on their fronts, letting the water lap against their feet.

It was a good ten minutes before they rolled onto their backs, muscles aching and sore. Bryan began to laugh, a deep throaty infectious thing. It made Zoe chuckle, and then roar loudly. The kids followed suit. They were looking up into the thick mists above them. It was over. They made it home.

"Now what do we do?" Cassie said.

"We need to get to the mainland and find an embassy," Bryan said. "Once we've proven our identity we'll be on the first plane back home."

They laughed again, relief washing over them.

A stiff breeze blew a window through the cloud, the mist beginning to clear.

Their laughter slowed, and then died on their lips. Cassie looked like she was about to cry.

"No," she said. "No. It can't be."

"But it is," Zoe said.

"But… we came through the Passage," Aaron said. "Where are we?"

"As Cawing Crow said," Bryan said. "The next world."

Another stiff breeze blew a hole in the mist. A murder of ravens took flight, spiraling up and cawing into the steep sky, a sky shaped like a dome.

# Epilogue

THE DIGGING EQUIPMENT had been packed away and the diggers had returned to their homes. Bryan and Cassie Angelo, and Zoe and Aaron Tate were lost. There was still the hope they might turn up somewhere, the items they found buried here red herrings, but Rosetta didn't think so.

Bryan wasn't just a boss, he was her friend. She had failed him. Now she was all alone in the world.

She took her phone out of her pocket. The number of hours she had spent using it for work, chatting to Bryan, carrying out his orders, were beyond counting. Now it was just a lump with no purpose. Like her. She sighed and let her robot arm fall to her side.

She felt a longing to make one final phone call, to leave a message on Bryan's answering machine, to give him a final farewell and apologize for not being able to do for him what he had done for her. She could not rescue him. Bryan would never hear it, but it would at least put her mind to rest.

She dialed his number – she always made it a point to remember numbers – and listened to the ringtone.

And then something strange happened.

She heard a phone ringing, from somewhere in the sinkhole.

It was Bryan's ringtone.

She followed the sound. It appeared to be coming from the center of the pit. She descended the ramps they'd had installed and found a square of bright light buzzing from beneath a pile of dirt. She bent down to pick it up. It was Bryan's phone all right. She saw her own number calling. But what was it doing here? Had he dropped it? Surely he would have sent her an email from his laptop letting her know?

She hung up. Tears sprung in her eyes and she felt weak to her knees. Was this the last place he was before disappearing? Right here? Her nose was blocked with mucous and she let herself cry. Bryan was gone. She would never see him again. She felt like the earth was falling beneath her feet.

When she looked down, she saw her feet *had* fallen into the Earth. Just an inch, but it was noticeable. She picked up her feet, and stepped aside. The earth sank again, this time to her knees. Suddenly the earth felt fragile.

The tingling sensation ran up and down her robot arm, almost painful in its intensity. And she realized for the first time that the prickling she'd felt had nothing to do with Bryan or his situation, but her own. It was a warning, and she had once again failed to heed it.

"Oh no," she said.

The ground fell away, and she sank.

THE EARTH SPAT HER OUT onto a clear flat grass glade. The sun was shining. Except it wasn't the sun. Its rays didn't warm her skin.

There was a large jungle with a wall around it, stretching as far as the eye could see. The wall behind her had a series of holes. Shadows emerged out of them, looking at Rosetta with fear.

The figures stepped out of their caves. They were not human. They were short and squat, covered head to foot in thick black hair, more apelike than man. She got to her feet and prepared to fight, knowing it would be the last fight she would ever have. These creatures were stocky and strong. No way she was going to be able to overpower them, even with her robot arm. But the creatures didn't show any outward aggression. In fact, they only seemed interested in her, curious.

Their eyes were wide at the sight of her robotic arm. The fake flesh that had been painstakingly grown and applied had been torn off by the dirt, mud and rocks she slid past on the way down to this place.

The apemen dropped to their knees. Others touched the metal of her arm with something approaching awe, transfixed. More of the figures emerged from the jungle, surrounding her on every side. An army of small furry creatures. Some of them were wounded. She felt like C3PO from Star Wars, elevated to God-like status by the Ewoks.

“Uh, hello,” Rosetta said. “Have any of you heard of Bryan Angelo, by any chance?”

# What Lies Beneath

# 1

THE TRANSFORMATION was unlike anything Bryan had ever seen.

On the surface, he'd traveled almost every inch of the world. He'd witnessed the dewey frost of English autumn on acres of rolling hill landscape, had seen the approaching heat waves of baked earth in the Middle East, and the incessant calm at Everest base camp while he was refilling his water bottle before the rest of the team—and seemingly the whole world—was even up.

But he had never seen anything quite so dramatic as this.

As the sun set it took its warm rays of light with it, leaving nothing to dissipate the thick fog that rolled in like thunder. It descended fast, faster than Bryan could believe, cold and chill, the air suddenly attaining weight and substance. Every exhalation produced pulsing wisps in front of his mouth and nostrils, like braying cattle on a chill morning.

Then the fog became dense, so thick it was difficult to see much farther than a couple of yards from the end of his nose, thicker than pea soup. The seafront was behind the shroud, but was impossible to make out. Even the gentle probing undulations were silenced.

Bryan took Zoe and Cassie's hands and backed away from the waterfront. On the surface, the tide would have risen toward them, and to stay where they were was foolish. But there weren't on the surface. It was difficult sometimes to remember that. There was no telling how the sea might act here.

The family rose up the beachfront and stood on the apex of a short hill. They cast around, but saw only walls of white. They moved farther back, waving their free hands to feel their surroundings.

"Ow!" Cassie said.

She put her finger in her mouth and sucked.

"Pine needles," she said.

"Broad leaves on this side," Zoe said.

"Any sign of a Hilton, by any chance?" Bryan said.

"Only a Best Western," Zoe said.

“I’ll pass,” Bryan said. “We’ve got to find somewhere to get dry and warm. If we can get dry, we’ll be in better shape come morning.”

“There are lots of dry reeds on the floor,” Zoe said.

“Scoop them up,” Bryan said. “I’ve got a lighter we might still be able to use.”

“A lighter?” Cassie said. “I thought you gave up smoking?”

“I did,” Bryan said.

“Then why do you have a lighter?” Cassie said.

“Do you think this is really the place to be having this discussion?” Bryan said.

“Don’t worry, Cassie,” Zoe said. “I’ll put a pin in it.”

Bryan sighed.

“We should start the fire on the beach,” Aaron said. “We don’t want to destroy whatever trees and plants are here. There might be food.”

“Not to mention indigenous tribes,” Zoe said.

“We should be so lucky,” Cassie said. “They’ll probably turn out to be cannibals.”

Zoe snorted with laughter. The others turned to look at her.

“Sorry,” she said. “Knowing our luck, she’s probably right. But we’re alive and well. Well, alive anyway. After everything we’ve been through that’s as much as we can expect.”

They scooped up the dry reeds and leaves and returned to the bluff overlooking the beach.

“The sea doesn’t seem to be rising,” Bryan said. “At least that’s some good news.”

The sea gently lapped against the sand. It was a calm night. Bryan didn’t know if this place got storms or not, what with the lack of any real atmosphere, but he wasn’t about to get any closer to the seafront than he had to. They were still damp head to foot from their forced swim. The moisture in the air clung to them, making their clothes feel heavy.

Bryan sat his kindling down and dug an inverted dome in the sand. It was rough and gravelly with stones, twigs and other detritus. He put his kindling in the middle of the sand bowl. Zoe, Cassie and Aaron deposited their own dry reeds to one side.

“Cassie, Aaron, go get more kindling,” Bryan said.

Aaron and Cassie moved up the beach, Cassie grumbling that Bryan could have said ‘Please’. Zoe waited until the kids had moved out of

earshot before whispering to Bryan.

“Do you think we’ll be all right?” she said.

It was what Bryan had on his mind ever since they’d arrived in this new world of theirs.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Bryan said. “We’re castaway on a desert island with no signs of anything in the way of civilisation. On the plus side, we’re surrounded by sea. If there have been sinkholes anywhere on the surface, the majority will have occurred in an ocean, meaning there will be plenty of fish down here. We’ll figure out a way to survive and then, hopefully, a way out of here.”

“Do you think there will be a Passage like in the last world?” Zoe said. “A way out of here?”

“‘World’?” Bryan said, arching an eyebrow.

“I don’t know what else to call these places,” Zoe said.

“World works for me,” Bryan said. “Sort of like Super Mario Brothers.”

“Nerd,” Zoe said.

“But without the pipes to take us home,” Bryan said.

“You’re forgetting the Passages,” Zoe said.

“If they exist in every world,” Bryan said. “Anyway, why would they?”

Zoe shrugged.

“Why wouldn’t they?” she said. “There was one in the last world. Stands to reason there might be another one here too somewhere.”

“We can hope, at least,” Bryan said.

“Why do these worlds even exist?” Zoe said.

“To torment us,” Bryan said. “That’s why they exist. The same reason for everything else in life.”

“Listen to Mr. Positive over here,” Zoe said.

“Quiet,” Bryan said. “I’m about to perform my manly duties.”

Bryan ran his thumb over the striker of his lighter. Nothing happened. He did it again. Again, nothing.

“What’s wrong?” Zoe said.

“Nothing,” Bryan said. “I think it’s a little damp from the sea. Let me try again.”

He shook it, for no other reason than he thought it might help. He pulled on the striker again, and this time a spark issued forth, and though the reeds did not set aflame, they did kindle the hope in Bryan’s heart. He pulled again and again on the striker, and finally, after a dozen attempts, a

spark kissed the reeds and a tongue of flame rose, spreading to the other reeds.

“Hahahahahaaa!” Bryan said, his laugh rising maniacally. “Yes!”

Aaron and Cassie arrived armed with their dry charges.

“Add them to the fire,” Bryan said.

Aaron deposited his burden, and the fire leapt higher. They could all feel the gorgeous warmth, and even the mist began to diffuse, the fog dispelled around them. The fog seemed to keep the fire in check too, holding it down, suppressing it, but unable to stifle it.

Bryan stood up, took Zoe by the hands, and performed a dance around the flames. Zoe laughed, covering her mouth. Bryan linked arms with Cassie and spun her around in a circle.

“Let go!” Cassie said. “Let go! I don’t dance! Let go!”

But he didn’t. And Zoe took Aaron by the hands, and they danced too. It looked reminiscent of the native American Indian rain dance, only this performance was in thanks for the warmth of the fire before them.

It was about time they felt some positive emotions from this whole experience, Bryan thought. And the worries and concerns of their situation melted away.

*SCREEEEAAAAHHH!*

The sound cut through the silent night, akin to nails on the unflinching iron of a corrugated roof. The family came to an immediate stop, looking out toward the water’s edge, where the sound had emanated from. Their breaths caught in their throats.

“What was that?” Cassie said, her voice raspy and coarse with fear.

“I don’t know,” Bryan said. “But it sounded big.”

“And angry,” Zoe said.

“And hungry,” Aaron said.

*SCREEEEAAAAHHH!*

It was the pained death of a beast in the throes of having its soul torn from its body. Then there was a gurgle, and a blasting hiss from a blowhole. The fog was too thick for the family to make out anything. It was just as well. They didn’t really want to see what was out there anyway.

But something was certainly out there.

Their triumphant jubilations had come to an abrupt end, their horror returning in full. The scream of the creature had cleansed them of any positive emotions.

They sat on the opposite side of the fire, facing toward the sea, listening as it gently lapped against the sand. The fire flickered shadow puppets across the thick fog, like a movie screen, only these shades were projected from their own minds, their own demons and fears, coming to life in three dimensions.

It took a long time to find sleep, and when it finally arrived, the family were welcomed by their own personal monster, each different in size, shape and color. But they all spoke in the same twisted tongue:

*SCREEEEAAAAHHH!*

# 2

THE FEW HOURS of sleep Bryan managed to pry from his consciousness were brimming with roving beasts and untamed monsters. Each time he fell to the depth of REM sleep, he shot up into a sitting position and stared in the direction of the sea.

Every ninety minutes—the time it takes to sink to the depths of REM—he witnessed a slice of night develop into day. When he finally awoke, the sun was high in the sky and the fog had dissipated. The sea gently scrubbed the beach and showed no sign of the horror it had exhibited the night before.

Bryan pushed himself up onto his elbows. Sand was embedded in his forehead. The fire had died in the night, its grey ash a pimple on the beach's surface. Bryan got to his feet and pulled up his pants. They had become twisted in the night. He staggered toward the seafront.

Despite his grogginess, he was alert enough to recall what lurked in the sea. And so he approached it slowly, cautiously. The water was beautiful and clear, the seabed visible beneath the ripples and gentle waves. Nothing could get the jump on him. He fell to his knees, cupped his hands, and splashed the water over his face, scrubbing the sleep and exhaustion out of his eyes and body.

He was still tired to his bones, but at least he could feign alertness. He breathed in the salty sea air, turned, and headed back up the seafront.

Cassie jerked awake and held a broken stick above her head in one hand, eyes wide and ready for an attack. She was too late to defend herself, if defense was even possible.

"Is it gone?" Cassie said, her voice whisper-thin.

There wasn't any need to specify what the 'it' was.

"Yes, it's gone," Bryan said. "Go back to sleep."

Cassie let out the breath she'd been holding. The arm held over her head dropped, striking the gritty sand. Her eyes closed and she fell back to sleep.

Aaron was asleep next to her, unmoving. Bryan would let them sleep. It'd been a long night and they needed all the rest they could get. Zoe was

nowhere to be seen, but he could make out the indentations her feet had made as she ascended the beachfront to the thick foliage at their backs. He followed them like breadcrumbs.

The canopy was thicker than Bryan had expected. There were many trees, but little in the way of food, so far as he could tell. There were the catcalls and tweets of birds. They flittered overhead, landing heavily on the branches to peer down at him. They turned their heads to the side in a clear expression of curiosity.

Perhaps they had never seen a man before. It hurt Bryan's head to wonder how the birds had gotten there in the first place. They would soon learn to fear the creature who walked upright on two legs. After all, they were meat.

"Zoe?" Bryan said, calling out.

There was no answer.

"Zoe?" Bryan said again.

"I'm over here," Zoe's voice said.

"Care to be more specific?" Bryan said.

There was a rustle, and then a flash of skin from behind a bush. The dry reeds and twigs snapped under his boots as he crossed to Zoe, who was crouched down, plucking berries from a hedge and placing them in a bowl she'd fashioned from a pair of broad leaves.

"I'm not sure we should be eating anything we're unsure of," Bryan said.

"They're blackberries," Zoe said. "Here, try one."

Bryan's stomach growled. He tossed the berry in his mouth and licked his fingers. The taste exploded across his taste buds. It was so sweet it could have been sugar. His stomach growled for more, and suddenly he was a great deal more hungry than he had been a moment earlier. He wanted nothing more than to shove all the berries in his face.

"We'll eat, then explore the island," Zoe said. "If we're lucky, we'll find we're part of a larger landmass and able to walk farther inland."

Bryan wasn't listening. His senses were fixated on the berries. Zoe had a whole bowlful at her feet. Bryan helped pluck more, depositing them in the bowl. His fingertips were stained black by the time they were finished.

They returned to the beachfront and shook Cassie and Aaron awake. Cassie shot up into a sitting position, arms rising above her head, armed

once more with her stick. She took a half-hearted swipe at Bryan, who let the strike smack his shin.

“Breakfast,” he said.

The sun was high in the sky and blisteringly hot. There was little breeze to wick away their sweat, and so they went back to sit in the shade of the trees, away from the beach.

The berries were delicious, and though Bryan didn’t like to think about what effect they would have on his digestive system later, he couldn’t help but stuff them in his face. The kids gradually woke up as they filled their bellies.

“Is there any water?” Cassie said. “I’m really thirsty.”

“I haven’t found any,” Zoe said. “But there are a couple of coconut trees. There will be juice in them.”

They finished their meal and wrapped what remained in a small leaf package. They began to climb a hill that rose at a steady angle. The deeper they went into the wilderness the more wildlife they saw. Bryan’s heart lifted at the possibilities.

They could survive here, he was certain of it. He had read Robinson Crusoe and remembered the farming techniques to survive long term. There was no reason they couldn’t do the same. But it was a worst case scenario. Ideally they’d find a way to get back home.

The hill incline steepened, and soon the family was sweating. It wasn’t a large hill, but the family was tired and weak with their recent exertions. They took a break at the edge of the woods, where they would no longer be protected by the trees’ sheltering canopy.

They took a seat, and to Bryan’s surprise and good fortune, came across a coconut on the ground that had recently come loose from its nest. He picked it up and looked about for a sharp implement to smash it open with, but without spilling the juice.

He found a handful of likely candidates. He proceeded to sort through them, choosing the best one and tossing the rest aside. The one he selected was five inches long and shaped like a dart. It was sharp at one end. Bryan gripped it in his fist and checked to make sure none of the edges would slice his skin open upon each strike.

He placed the coconut in a slight dip in a rock, drew his hand up high above his head, and brought the shard down. It made a satisfying *Thunk!* noise. Within three strikes he was already dripping with sweat. He hacked

at the coconut, the white interior flakes coming loose until a hole was formed.

Bryan picked up the coconut in both hands and turned it upside down. The juice dribbled from the small hole in its rent shell, down Bryan's chin. He placed his lips over the hole, the rough fibers of the coconut's outer shell poking at the soft flesh of his lips.

The sweet juice ran over his tongue and down his throat. He didn't even like the taste of coconut, but the juice quenched his thirst. He stopped, gasping for oxygen. He wiped an arm across his lips and handed the coconut to Cassie, who pulled on it with relish.

Bryan picked up another coconut and began hacking at it as he had the first. He had to take another long pull to replace the sweat he'd expended to get the coconut open in the first place. He handed it to Aaron. Zoe drank what remained.

"Is it enough?" Bryan said. "Do you want more?"

Zoe shook her head and shut her eyes. She looked exhausted. They all did.

"We should wait till it's less hot before going up the hill," Bryan said.

"Then the fog will come in and we won't be able to see far," Zoe said.

"You think the fog will return tonight?" Bryan said.

He'd assumed it'd been a rare occurrence.

"Yes," Zoe said. "I think there's something about our location that produces the fog. But we'll see tonight."

No one wanted to talk about what they'd heard the previous night in the deep recesses of the sea. They left the subject unspoken.

Bryan inserted his rock knife into a now empty shell and pried at it left to right, working it loose so the shell split down the middle. He picked it up and smashed it on the rock. The coconut broke into a dozen pieces. Zoe and Aaron picked the pieces up and placed them in a broad leaf.

They repeated the process with the second coconut, keeping one shard for each of them to work at with their teeth as they left the safety of the sheltered area and began to ascend the hill.

They were dripping with sweat by the time they got to the hilltop. Here at least, there was a slight breeze. It was warm, but nonetheless pleasant. They cupped their hands over their eyes and peered into the distance, where the azure of the ocean met the sapphire blue of the sky, a band of hazy white sandwiched between them, the horizon.

To their north was another island, its land as black as charcoal. A tall mountain jutted from its center. There was but a sprinkling of dry wispy trees at its base. To their east were half a dozen large boulders, green with algae and lashed by the sea. There was nothing but blank ocean to their south and west.

“Well, that’s the end of that,” Cassie said. “We’re stuck here. Forever.”

“At least we have each other,” Zoe said.

“What are you talking about?” Aaron said. “There’s another island.”

“Yes, we can see it,” Cassie said. “But it’s not going to be much use to us. There’s even less on it than there is on this one.”

“Not that one,” Aaron said. “That one.”

He pointed in a northwesterly direction, in the distance. They all looked, but couldn’t make anything out.

“I can’t see another island,” Zoe said.

“It’s there,” Aaron said. “A dark smudge on the horizon. Can’t you see it?”

Zoe peered at the horizon again, but saw nothing. She frowned at Aaron.

“There’s nothing there, Aaron,” she said. “I understand you want to see something, but there’s nothing there.”

“No, he’s right,” Bryan said. “I see it too. It’s the sun. It’s bright overhead and makes it difficult to see, but it’s there. Cup your hands over your eyes and look again.”

Zoe did, looking in the direction they suggested, but still she couldn’t make it out…

And then she did.

It seemed to pop into existence, flickering in and out, a fly in the horizon’s milky ointment.

“How far would you say it is?” Zoe said.

“The Earth’s surface curves out at about three miles,” Bryan said. “Assuming the curvature is the same here, I would say it’s about that distance away.”

“So what if there’s another island?” Cassie said. “It'll be just like this one. And we’ll be stuck here. Still.”

“But it might not be an island,” Zoe said. “It could be the finger of a larger landmass.”

“If we can get there, we might find another island, or a tribe of people,” Bryan said. “We might even find the Passage.”

Cassie smiled, hopes rising.

“We might find the way out of here,” she said. “What are we waiting for?”

# 3

THE FAMILY spread out, keeping within sight of one another as they passed through the woods. Aaron stumbled into stinging nettles more than once, little white bumps rising on his exposed shins, but Cassie was on hand with a dock leaf, dirt, and more saliva than necessary.

As they descended the incline back toward the beach, the family knocked on each fallen tree they came to. They listened to the sound it made, most of the time shaking their heads. But not always. They were halfway back to the beach when Cassie called out.

“I’ve got one,” she said.

That wasn’t new. They’d found several trees that emitted the hollow noise they were looking for, but upon closer inspection Bryan had decided not to go with any of them, deciding the tree was either too strong or too rotten.

They wanted a tree that sounded hollow, that had fallen some time ago, but not too long. It meant the trunk would be rotten on the inside and save them a great deal of carving work, having to hollow it out for themselves. The boat they would build did not need to last forever, only the relatively short distance to the next island.

Bryan put his ear to the bark and rapped on it, moving down the trunk. A smile spread across his face.

“This looks like it,” he said. “This is just what we’re looking for.”

“Now what?” Cassie said.

“Now we drag it to the seafront,” Bryan said.

They pulled vines from the trees and lashed them around the protruding branch stumps. Wild creatures and a chaos of bugs fled their home of safety as the family tugged, pulling on the tree and making it slide along the ground. The land here was flat and there was little resistance. Cassie screamed when a bug found sanctuary on her foot.

“Why are you screaming for?” Bryan said. “They’ll be our dinner one day.”

Cassie pressed her lips together and turned pale. Bryan smiled broadly.

“Come on,” he said. “We’re almost there. On the count of three. Ready? One, two, three.”

The family pulled on ‘three,’ and the trunk slid another yard. It was hard work, and within minutes Bryan’s shirt was soaked with sweat. It clung to his impressive straining muscles. Zoe could hardly keep her eyes off him.

“One, two, three,” Bryan said again.

The family pulled again on the vines, causing it to slide another yard.

They covered the ground quickly and got to the lip of the beachfront within two hours. The sun was kissing the horizon now. The relief from the heat it provided was refreshing.

“Look at that,” Zoe said.

On the horizon, but approaching fast, was the thick pea soup fog. It trailed the sun’s dying rays of sunlight like a blanket. The moisture was pleasant on their skin, soothing, and brought a welcome shiver through them.

“I’ll find something for dinner,” Zoe said.

“A steak, if you can manage it,” Bryan said.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Zoe said.

She put a hand to Bryan’s cheek. He had dark circles around his eyes and deep creases on his brow.

“You need to rest,” she said.

“We need to get out of here,” Bryan said.

“We will,” Zoe said. “But we’re not going anywhere tonight. Not with what might be out there. We can take our time.”

Bryan nodded.

“Three miles isn’t far,” he said. “But it’s far enough that if we get swept up in a strong current, we might not make it to the island.”

“Then we’ll have to paddle harder,” Zoe said. “But we can’t stay here forever. Not for the rest of our lives, never mind the rest of the kids’ lives.”

“I’ll make a fishing rod,” Bryan said.

“What good will that do?” Zoe said.

“Just in case we end up having to stay at sea longer than expected,” Bryan said.

“Fish every day for months…” Zoe said. “Sounds fun. But maybe we can think of something else to spice up our day.”

She kissed Bryan on the lips and gave his abs a lingering look. They were clearly defined through his wet shirt.

“Go make dinner,” Bryan said.

Zoe headed into the forest. Bryan turned to the log they’d dragged across the island. He ran his hand over it. It was in good shape. It had clearly fallen some time ago and become hollow, but its outer shell kept its shape and, he was certain, would hold across the water. They needed to strengthen its hull with natural resin they could fashion using mashed vegetation and tree amber. It would plug any holes and hold the hull together. The family would paddle across to the island Aaron had identified.

Bryan sat on the beach, his muscles pained and sore, flinching like he was an old man. He took a long stretch of pliable material off his back, something he’d found while descending the slope, and began to peel it into the shape he desired.

“What are you hoping to do with that?” Cassie said. “Hoping to catch one of those monsters?”

“Not if I can help it,” Bryan said, biting through tendons he’d found from an abandoned kill. Nature’s twine. “If there are big fish, there must be smaller fish to feed them. And us.”

“Fish?” Cassie said. “I’ve never heard a fish make that kind of noise before.”

She was right, but Bryan wasn’t in the mood to discuss it.

“We need to find a regular source of sustenance as soon as we can,” Bryan said.

There was a rush of water at the water’s edge as something waded through it. Bryan thought he caught sight of a shadow moving on the fringes of his foggy sphere. It was thick, with a slimy appearance. He blinked, and it was gone, leaving behind the swirling fog it had disturbed.

Another thrash in the sea, and a muffled squeal was cut short as soon as it had begun, cut short by death’s hand, Bryan thought. Whether it was the creature he’d seen in the shallows that had met its end, or a victim of it, Bryan couldn’t tell.

The beach returned to meditative silence after that. Blissful, terrifying silence. Terrifying because soon the predator would require another meal to fill its belly, and soon, if Bryan hadn’t missed his guess. It disturbed Bryan that he and the others were not all that far from its clutches.

They ate a meal of roasted nuts and leafy salad a little farther up the beach than the previous night. None of them took their eyes off the fog as they fed their faces with the berries and coconut fragments Zoe had made for dessert. It was a filling, if not delicious, meal.

They lay around the fire. None of them needed the heat, but the light gave them comfort. There was a slight chill in the moist air, a nice respite from the heat they had experienced on the climb up the hill. They were already beginning to drift asleep, their bellies full and the exertions of the day catching up with them.

*SCREEAAAHHH!*

The family shot up, peering at their surroundings, scrubbing the scene for any sign of a monster from their nightmares, but there was little to see through the thick shroud.

And then they heard it, what sounded like words, indistinct and unclear on the breeze.

Someone else was on the island.

# 4

“PUT THE FIRE OUT,” Bryan whispered.

Zoe was fastest to react, cupping the sand in her hands and tossing it over the flames. Aaron and Cassie were beside her, helping doubt the embers.

Bryan got down on his hands and feet and edged into the fog, in the direction of the voices he thought he’d heard. He slithered forward an inch at a time, the sand rough and coarse, digging into his soft palms. He listened attentively, turning his head side to side. He crawled forward again and froze.

The voices were close now, ahead and to Bryan’s left. They were rough, from the lower echelons of society, British, if he hadn’t missed his guess. There was a pair of them, perhaps three. He couldn’t make out their words. They stepped in his direction, and suddenly he heard every word. More than that, he could see them. Their profiles, in any case.

They were three vague shadows, shaded by the lantern light one of them carried, illuminating their profiles against the thick fog. Two of them wore hats of the old nineteenth century style that sat perched on the head, the brim curled up. The third wore no hat and carried the lantern. He had long hair that reached his shoulders. Bryan caught the strong smell of cheap alcohol as they passed.

“Hurry up, will ya?” a croaky voice said. “I hate being so close to the water like this.”

“Quit your complaining,” a deep voice said. “We’re on the island now. There’s no big monsters here.”

“But it can reach us with its arms,” a shaky, scared voice said.

“Tentacles,” the deep voice said. “They’re tentacles, not arms.”

“Tent’cles, arms, what’s the difference?” the scared voice said. “They’ll still snap off an arm or leg if they get the chance.”

“Or your head, if yer lucky,” the deep voice said. “You won’t even notice the difference.”

“Neither would we,” the croaky voice said. “He’ll still be talking out of his jacksy!”

The two deeper voices, larger men by the sound of them, cackled with mirth.

The lantern spun around to face them.

“Keep your voices down!” the scared voice said. “I don’t want to bring these monsters down on us! We shouldn’t be here. This is its home, its lair. And we came strolling right into it!”

“Under Stoneheart’s orders,” the deep voice said. “And what were you going to do exactly? Tell him ‘No’? I’d like to see you try.”

“I’d say this ain’t no job for a man of my station,” the scared voice said indignantly.

“Your station?” the deep voice said. “You’re a deck swabber. Now, shut up and bring round the lantern. We’ll get the stash and then get out of here. Are you okay with that, my lady?”

Undisguised snickers from croaky voice.

Judging by their coarse voices and general aroma, all three men sounded used to swigging at the bottle and making merry. Presently they were heading toward the center of the island for their stash. What stash they were referring to, Bryan could only guess. Money? Food? Alcohol?

Bryan was tempted to follow them, so he could take advantage of their supplies once they were gone, but he didn’t want to risk letting the men stumble upon Aaron, Cassie and Zoe as they made their way back to their boat.

Bryan gave a moment’s thought to the boat the three men must have brought to shore. It would be much better than the hollowed out tree trunk they needed to fashion. If they needed to stay at sea longer than they expected, this professionally-made boat would have been ideal.

But if there were three men, there was no reason to suspect there weren’t more. They would be residing on a large ship just off the coast, having sent this smaller ship to fetch supplies. They did not know the island was already inhabited, and Bryan intended on keeping it that way.

And if the boat went missing, it would only draw attention to the family. Bryan wanted the men gone as soon as possible. He turned and headed back toward where the others were waiting.

“Bryan?” Zoe said softly.

“Yes,” Bryan said. “It’s me.”

He stood up and approached them. They were two yards from where he thought they should have been. Get turned around in this fog and you were

doomed.

“We have to leave here,” Bryan said. “Now.”

“What’s going on?” Cassie said. “Will they help us?”

“No,” Bryan said. “I don’t think so.”

“How did they get here?” Aaron said.

“Originally?” Bryan said. “The same way we did, I suppose. Come on, we have to go hide somewhere until they’re gone.”

They headed along the beach before climbing up the seafront and lay prostrate on the bluff of the rise.

“What are they doing here?” Zoe said.

“They came to pick up some kind of stash,” Bryan said. “I’m not sure what exactly.”

“You kids get some sleep,” Zoe said. “We’ll keep watch.”

“Get some sleep with random strangers on the same island as us?” Cassie said. “You must be joking. I’d sleep better if Jack the Ripper was here with us.”

And so they waited. But despite Aaron and Cassie’s protestations, they soon began to nod off. A twig snapped in the woods behind them, and then something else crunched underfoot. These soft sounds alone were enough to awaken the sleepers.

“I told you we should have turned right at the tree!” the scared voice said. “Didn’t I say that, Earl?”

Aaron and Cassie’s eyes widened and they peered left and right. The three men were coming from directly behind them. Bryan pressed his index finger to his lips, asking for silence.

“Will you shut up?” the deep voice said. “We’re only a few yards from where we want to be.”

“We would be in the right place if you’d listened to me in the first place,” the scared voice grumbled.

“Do you want to taste the back of my hand?” the deep voice said.

“Ah!” the scared one said.

“You didn’t really hit him, did you?” the croaky voice said. “You know it’s my job to do that.”

“I didn’t touch him,” the deep voice said. “He’s just complaining for nothin’.”

The scared man fell flat on his ass. He blew on his feet.

“What’s wrong with you now?” the deep voice said. “I told you, there’s no monsters on the land.”

“I know that!” the scared voice said. “It’s the sand! It’s hot!”

“What are you talking about now?” the deep voice said. “The sand ain’t hot.”

“That’s cos you’re wearing my boots!” the scared voice said. “If you were barefoot like me, you’d know the sand is hot.”

“It’s nighttime,” the deep voice said. “There’s fog. Why would the sand be hot?”

“I don’t know, but it is!” the scared voice said. “Look!”

“I swear, if this is a trick…” the deep voice said.

“It’s not a trick!” the scared voice said. “I swear! Just touch it! There!”

There was a pause as the deep voiced man knelt. Bryan couldn’t see what was going on, but he knew what was going to happen. The leader of the gang—who Bryan assumed was the deep voiced man—was going to touch the sand and realize there had been a fire there. Which meant there was someone else on the island. How it would play out after that, Bryan didn’t know.

But he could think of three potential outcomes. Either the trio would let them go and head back to their ship, ignoring anything had happened, or they would tell their captain, and who knew how he would react. Or, the gang would come looking for the family themselves.

“You don’t reckon the monster did it?” the scared voice said. “Maybe it can breathe fire. All the worst demons can.”

Deep voice didn’t respond. He was thinking. Yes, Bryan thought. He was the leader. The dangerous one.

“Look what I found,” the croaky voice said. “A long blonde hair. Belongs to a real beauty, I reckon.”

“Yeah,” the scared voice said. “I reckon so too. What do you think, Smithy? Should we go look for them?”

Silence as Smithy thought. *Very dangerous*, Bryan thought.

“Yes,” Smithy a.k.a. deep voice said. “I don’t see no harm in that. The girl might be needing our assistance.”

“Yeah,” the scared voice said. “She might be needing us to save her from her innocence.”

“You’re so coarse, Skinny,” Smithy said. “No element of common humanism to be seen within your skinny frame.”

“So, we’re not going to… rescue her?” Skinny a.k.a. scared voice said.

His voice dripped with disappointment.

“We’ll have to see how things pan out,” Smithy said. “We’re already late. Stoneheart will be sure to take the cattail to us when we get back. So we’d better take out on the girl now what Stoneheart will take out on us later. It’s only fair.”

“Sounds plenty fair to me,” Skinny said.

Bryan didn’t like the direction the conversation was going. The men needed to be avoided at all costs. Or better yet, removed from the equation altogether.

“Get out of here,” Bryan whispered to Zoe.

“No,” Zoe said, gripping Bryan’s wrist.

“Hide,” Bryan said. “I’ll slow them down.”

“You’ll never take them all down by yourself,” Zoe said.

But that wasn’t Bryan’s plan. He just wanted to slow them down, to give the others the time they needed to escape. But escape where?

These men were likely heartless killers, no doubt having claimed dozens of lives between them. Bryan was a businessman. He’d only ever dealt mortal blows to business proposals. Bryan doubted he could delay the men for long.

He got to his feet, shuffling backwards, away from the beach ridge. They headed into the forest. Bryan jogged through it, but not too fast. His purpose was not to lose his family, but to get some space between them and the men.

“Did you hear that?” Earl said.

He was referring to the family’s noisy footsteps. Great. Instead of losing the men, they’d inadvertently attracted them to their location. Their footsteps would be audible and easy to follow. They couldn’t head much farther into the forest before the strangers would catch up to them.

“Spread out,” Bryan said. “We’ll stand a better chance if we spread out.”

“Bryan,” Zoe said. “There’s a better way.”

“How?” Bryan said.

“We get them to stay in a place we control, of our own choosing,” Zoe said. “Then we attack them.”

“If we attack them, their friends will only come looking for them,” Bryan said.

“But not before we take their little boat and head to the island Aaron saw on the horizon,” Zoe said. “The fog could cover our escape.”

Bryan’s eyes moved to the side. He hadn’t considered that. He shook his head.

“They might catch us,” he said. “And who knows how far their ship is from shore. If they shout, they might get their friends’ attention, or else attract other… things.”

The monster. It sounded ridiculous, the kind of thing a child afraid of what was under the bed might say.

“The men certainly thought there was something dangerous out there,” Bryan said.

“Between real men or potential monsters, I know which one I’d prefer to face,” Zoe said.

Bryan nodded in agreement.

“How should we begin?” he said.

“We have two options,” Zoe said. “Either we use Cassie to lure the men into a trap where we can attack them-”

“We can’t do that,” Bryan said.

The idea of using Cassie as bait made him feel physically sick.

“Or, I have the same color hair as Cassie,” Zoe said. “It could just as easily have been my hair they found on the beach. They don’t need to know Aaron and Cassie are here. They can run and hide. The fog will give us some protection. We have the element of surprise on our side. It might give us the edge we need.”

“And if we fail and they kill or capture us?” Bryan said.

“Then we’ll be dead, or we’ll go with them,” Zoe said.

“No,” Bryan said. “You can’t let yourself get captured. You know the kinds of things they’ll do to you if they take you back to their ship.”

“But Cassie and Aaron will be safe,” Zoe said. “At least they can live out their lives. They might even find a way out of here.”

It was a dangerous plan. Bryan didn’t much like the idea of putting Zoe in that kind of position.

“No,” Bryan said.

“Bryan,” Zoe said, her voice growing harsh. “There’s no other way. They’re hardened criminals. And we’re not murderers, Bryan. They don’t have the same morals we do. I’ve never taken a man’s life before. I’m not

sure I'll be able to. Listen, I can pretend to be injured, to get them into position. Then you attack."

Cassie stepped forward.

"Sounds good," she said. "Except for one thing. You honestly expect us to run away and hide while you take all the risks?"

"It's the only way to keep both you and Aaron safe," Bryan said.

"Ain't gonna happen," Cassie said, folding her arms.

"I agree," Aaron said. "The best chance we have is if we work together."

"We can't take the risk you'll get hurt," Zoe said.

"That risk is reduced if we work together," Aaron said. "And if we're all going to get out of here, we're going to have to work together."

"I'll be the bait," Cassie said.

"Cassie, no," Bryan said, shaking his head.

"It makes more sense for both you and Zoe to attack," Cassie said. "You're both bigger and stronger than me. So, shut up and let me do this."

Bryan shut his eyes and let out a long breath.

"Okay," he said. "But nothing is going to happen to you, Cassie. I promise."

"I know," Cassie said, giving him her most confident smile.

The undergrowth crunched and snapped behind them.

"They're coming," Bryan said. "Everyone get into position."

Bryan and Zoe hid behind a pair of trees on either side of the clearing. Aaron headed on a little farther before taking his position. Cassie lay on the ground, sprinkling some of the detritus over herself and mussing up her hair, as if she'd just suffered a fall.

Cassie could see Bryan and Zoe hiding behind their trees from where she lay, but the approaching strangers wouldn't know they were there. They wouldn't even know how many of them there were.

From behind his tree, Bryan could see Zoe. Her face was scrunched up in fear. Bryan reached behind himself and felt for the rock knife he'd used to hack the coconuts open. Zoe saw him do that, and bent down to pick up her own weapon: a large rock. It wasn't very heavy, but if she brought it down hard enough, it could smash a skull.

Bryan couldn't allow what the men wanted to do with Zoe and Cassie. It would be over his dead body—literally—before that would happen.

The foliage snapped and was pushed aside as the men emerged from the darkness. Cassie lay sprawled on the ground. Her expression became

relieved at the sight of them.

“Well, lookie what we have here,” Earl said.

“Oh, thank goodness,” Cassie said. “I got washed up on this island and have been living here ever since. I was walking and tripped. I think I sprained my ankle. Can you help me?”

“I claim first dibs!” Skinny said, stepping forward.

Smithy’s arm flashed out, holding Skinny back. He eyed the clearing, his expression unreadable.

“Hold on there, partner,” he said. “You don’t just go rushing into a girl like that. You’ve got to take your time. You’ve got to make conversation. You’ve got to set the mood.”

“I don’t care about no mood!” Skinny said, taking another step forward.

Smithy’s arm flashed out again.

“Then observe, and learn,” he said.

He turned to Cassie.

“Hello there, little lady,” he said.

“Uh, hello,” Cassie said.

“I notice you appear to have tripped and fallen over,” Smithy said.

“Yes,” Cassie said. “I think I sprained my ankle.”

“Ah,” Smithy said. “I did wonder why you hadn’t gotten to your feet yet.”

“It hurts,” Cassie said.

“I’m sure it does,” Smithy said. “We’ll come to help you in just a moment. Are you all alone here?”

“Yes,” Cassie said. “Can you please come help me? It’s really sore!”

Skinny took another step forward.

“I’ll come help you all right!” he said.

Smithy grabbed Skinny by the collar and pulled him to the ground. Skinny howled in pain.

“I must apologize for my friend,” Smithy said. “Some men are little more than wild dogs.”

He took a few steps forward, just in front of the two trees where Bryan and Zoe were hiding.

“When we came here, I could have sworn I saw several people’s footprints through the forest,” Smithy said.

“I came here back and forth, looking for food,” Cassie said.

“Well, that explains it,” Smithy said. “Except for the fact the footprints appear to be various sizes.”

“They must have changed size each time I came and went,” Cassie said. “Disturbing them can have that effect.”

“I stand corrected yet again,” Smithy said with a warm smile. “How did you get here, little lady?”

“I was sucked through a hole and came here,” Cassie said.

“Oh man,” Skinny said, rolling his eyes. “Seriously?”

“A hole,” Smithy said, not taking his eyes off Cassie.

Bryan was getting a bad feeling about this.

“There are other worlds, like this one,” Cassie said. “They’re enclosed and cut off from one another. But the real world, where I come from, is big, up on the surface.”

“The surface,” Smithy said with a frown. “And where might this ‘surface’ be?”

Cassie pointed up at the sky.

“I don’t know how far,” she said. “But I think I fell a long way. Now, will you help me, please?”

“Sure,” Smithy said.

He took out a pistol and leveled it at Cassie.

“As there is no one else out here, I trust I won’t have need to use my pistol,” he said.

Cassie gulped, her eyes wide. Pistols, Bryan thought. Why hadn’t they prepared for that possibility?

“Skinny?” Smithy said. “If you please.”

“Finally!” Skinny said.

He jumped to his feet and ran toward Cassie, who screamed. There was no disguising the genuine fear in it.

“Help!” Cassie said as Skinny fell on top of her. “Get off me! Get off!”

It was too much for Bryan to witness, and he leapt forward, stabbing Skinny in the leg. He howled in pain, rolling off Cassie.

“Ow!” Skinny said. “He stabbed me in the leg!”

Zoe rushed forward and brought her rock down on the man. His roll knocked her aim off and she struck his arm instead. There was a loud crack.

Skinny screamed.

“She broke my arm!” he said.

And then Aaron came rushing out, roaring at the top of his voice. He brought a stick down, swiping Skinny across the face, making a whipping sound.

“Ah!” Skinny said. “He whipped me!”

Finally, Cassie drew her foot back and threw a swift kick up into Skinny’s crotch.

“Nngff!” Skinny said, holding himself and lying flat on his face.

“Serves you right,” Smithy said to Skinny. “I told you not to act like a wild dog, didn’t I?”

He raised his sights to include the whole family.

“So, a family,” he said.

“Please, don’t harm them,” Bryan said.

“Put your weapons down,” Smithy said.

Bryan eyed the pistol in Smithy’s hand. It was one of those old types where you had to fill it first with gunpowder and then put a ball bearing inside. The man might get off a single shot, but Bryan didn’t want to be responsible for whoever it might hit. He put his makeshift knife down. Zoe and Aaron followed suit.

“Good,” Smithy said. “Earl?”

Earl took four pairs of handcuffs that hung from his belt and tossed them to the family.

“If you please,” Smithy said.

“I want your word you won’t hurt them,” Bryan said.

Smithy pursed his lips, and then nodded. Bryan handed a pair of handcuffs to each family member. They were hoops with a bar that fastened them in place. Rudimentary, but effective. They took turns putting them on one another.

“On your knees,” Smithy said.

They dropped to their knees. Only then did Smithy stand up. Skinny, partially recovered, got shakily to his feet.

“You’ve got to let me get my revenge on them,” he said.

“Oh, I will,” Smithy said. “But first let me have mine.”

He pressed the pistol to Skinny’s forehead.

“What are you doing?” Skinny said.

“I hope this experience will teach you to be less of a dog in future,” Smithy said.

“Won’t do him a lot of good if he’s got a hole in his head,” Earl said.

“Will it?” Smithy pressed.

“Yes,” Skinny said. “Yes!”

A wet patch spread across the front of his pants.

“Yes, it will!” he cried.

“Oh, man,” Earl said. “Pull the trigger and do him a favor.”

“Okay,” Smithy said, pulling back the hammer.

“No!” Skinny said.

Smithy pulled the trigger.

*Clack!*

Empty. Skinny had his eyes clenched closed tight. He had heard the sound of the empty chamber, but hadn’t reacted yet. Then, very slowly, he unfurled his eyes.

“The gun was empty?” Skinny said.

“As empty as your bladder,” Smithy said.

“As empty as my bladder?” Skinny said. “What does that mean?”

He looked down at the front of his pants. Earl burst out laughing.

“You let me mess myself?” Skinny said. “I thought we were friends?”

“We’ve never been friends,” Smithy said. “I’ve never liked you.”

“That’s news to me,” Skinny said.

“Consider it issued,” Smithy said.

He turned to the family, still on their knees. He locked eyes on Bryan’s furious expression.

“Now, let me tell you what’s going to happen,” he said. “You and the boy are going to join us on our ship. You will work the deck. It will be difficult and hard work, but you will do it. Why? Because I’m doing you the favor of not bringing the ladies with us.”

Bryan breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thank you,” he said. “Thank you, thank you. I swear, you’ll never hear a word of complaint from either of us.”

“I’m not finished,” Smithy said, licking his lips. “The three of us will be the only ones who know about your ladies marooned here on this island. If they try to escape, or aren’t here to satisfy our needs whenever we make port, then you die. If you misbehave as a deckhand, they die. Am I making myself clear?”

Bryan’s world was shattered. A high point of hope followed by a precipice of despair.

“You’re a monster,” Bryan said.

“No,” Smithy said. “Just an ordinary man with ordinary needs. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to take the girl first.”

“No…” Cassie said.

“No!” Zoe said. “Take me. Please. Take me first.”

“The girl needs to be broken in,” Smithy said. “I’m afraid my friends here won’t be altogether gentle with her, and I doubt they’ll wait until I’m done with both of you before insisting they take their turn.”

“Please!” Bryan said. “Don’t do this. I’m a very rich man. I can give you anything you want. Anything!”

“And where is this fortune?” Smithy said.

Bryan’s mouth was dry.

“It’s on the surface,” he said.

“The surface,” Smithy said, nodding.

“A house?” Bryan said. “A car? An airplane? Just tell me, and they’re yours.”

Smithy pursed his lips.

“I’ll take my chances with what we have here, thanks,” he said.

“No!” Bryan said.

“I’m doing you and your family a kindness,” Smithy said. “Believe me, it’s for the best.”

“No, Smithy,” a voice behind them said. “I’m afraid it’s not.”

# 5

SMITHY'S NECK turned slowly to peer back at the figure standing behind them. His shoulders fell with recognition. Smithy stood up.

He towered over the other figure, who was a boy, not much older than Aaron and Cassie. He wore shabby clothes, but he held himself with something approaching pride. Earl and Skinny seemed much less sure of themselves.

"We found these people here on the island," Smithy said. "They attacked us, injuring Skinny, as you can see. We're just taking our pound of flesh, that's all."

"Is that what happened," the boy said, his inflection making it clear he didn't really believe him, that perhaps he had seen more than Smithy thought.

"Yes," Smithy said.

"Mm-hm," the boy said. "The reason Skinny has his pants around his ankles will have to be explained. Otherwise it might appear the family were simply defending themselves against a trio of assailants."

"I should get something back in exchange for the harm they did me!" Skinny said.

Smithy took a step forward, towering over the boy, who didn't flinch.

"Stoneheart won't hear a word about this," Smithy said. "Or he'll be losing a deckhand mighty soon."

"Take your empty threats elsewhere," the boy said. "Stoneheart will hear the truth."

Smithy grunted in the back of his throat. It was an ugly sound. It was meant to be. He leaned over the boy to appear as threatening as possible.

"When Stoneheart's time has passed, you'll be mine, Jim," Smithy said, barely a whisper.

"You're planning a mutiny?" Jim said. "I'll make sure to let Stoneheart know."

Smithy gritted his teeth. He dearly, clearly, wanted to throttle Jim, but something held him back. He spoke without turning to face the others.

"Come on, boys," Smithy said. "We've got some rum to deliver."

Skinny glanced at Cassie, on her knees before him. He looked like a boy who had been denied his favorite toy at the store.

The three men left, disappearing into the foliage.

Jim was left with the family. His eyes met each of them in turn. He had a grubby face, but his eyes shone like emeralds, strong and determined. There was no way a boy of his age survived aboard a boatful of such men without learning a thing or two about manipulating others. Bryan and his family were chess pieces to be moved and controlled by the boy and anyone else who wanted to use them as leverage.

*What kind of place have we come to?* Bryan thought.

Jim approached Cassie first. Bryan struggled to his feet, his hands behind his back. He needn't have concerned himself. Jim extended a hand to Cassie.

"Please, let me help you up," he said.

Cassie looked from his proffered hand to his face and seemed to find something she trusted there. She allowed him to take her restrained hands and help her to her feet. Jim removed the bar from the handcuffs. Cassie rubbed her wrists.

"Don't be thinking you're safe," Jim said, releasing Aaron's hands. "This isn't my decision. Only Stoneheart can make that choice, but I will help you as far as I'm able."

"Nonetheless, thank you for helping us," Bryan said, rubbing his own wrists.

"Can you help us?" Zoe said.

"I already have," Jim said. "But I may have only delayed what you might have to experience at the hands of these men. Having women aboard is bad luck, but I fear it'll be even worse luck for you. Men at sea a long time become animals. Only Stoneheart can protect you, but he is just as likely to condemn you."

"I understand," Bryan said.

Now he was free, Bryan wanted nothing more than to run and hide until this nightmare was over. But there was nowhere safe to hide on this island. The sky was beginning to lighten already, and soon the fog, their only protection, would disintegrate around them.

"What kind of man is this captain of yours?" Bryan said.

"Mad," Jim said. "Quite mad. He sways between mindfulness and madness daily. It's difficult to keep a handle on him at times."

“And that’s what your job is?” Bryan said. “Keeping a handle on the captain?”

“It’s one of my duties,” Jim said.

“Why were the men afraid of you?” Bryan said.

“They’re not scared of anything,” Jim said, “save death and evil spirits.”

“But they were cautious with you,” Bryan said.

“I’m Stoneheart’s first mate,” Jim said. “I’m closer to him than anyone else aboard. I’ve been known to sway him with certain decisions from time to time. But we must go now. I fear Smithy will attempt to cast off without us if he can.”

Jim turned and headed toward the foliage. He stopped when he noticed the family weren’t following.

“Aren’t you coming?” he said.

The family shared anxious expressions.

“This is a bad idea,” Bryan said.

“Yep,” Cassie said. “And yet it’s the only one we’ve got.”

# 6

THE FOG was thinning but still present as Jim led the family back to the beach where his ship's boat floated offshore. Jim hadn't come to the island alone. Three men sat waiting as they approached. None of them made a comment when they saw the family, but they all darted concerned glances at the girls.

"This is Aldo, Fritz and Joshua," Jim said. "They're the most honest men aboard the Celeste."

They could have been background dressing of a back alley, complete with knives and pistols. Jim smiled when he saw they'd commandeered half the rum from Smithy. It was a clever move. The ship would not leave without their full supply of rum, not even by accident.

The boat rocked beneath them as the family climbed aboard. Zoe gripped Bryan's arm as she lost her footing. She fell into the stern of the boat. Jim pushed off from the coast and hopped into the boat. He took a seat facing the family as his men rowed.

"You're dressed strangely," Jim said.

"We're not from here," Bryan said.

"That much is obvious from how you speak," Jim said. "You're not British, are you?"

"We're American," Bryan said.

"What's that?" Jim said

"It's another country," Bryan said. "Far from Britain."

Jim eyed Bryan uncertainly.

"I've sailed the seas and never heard of this 'America'," he said.

"That's because it can't be found here," Bryan said. "It's on the surface."

"Surface?" Jim said.

Bryan told Jim their tale, beginning from where they'd fallen through the sinkhole on the surface and their adventure through the lost world, and how they ended up here. Jim looked skeptical, but never made a comment.

"You're due some good luck by the sound of things," Jim said.

“What can you tell us about Stoneheart?” Bryan said. “Is there anything we can say or do that might encourage him to let us go?”

“Let you go?” Jim said. “Unlikely. The best you can hope for is to become part of his crew.”

“I just want to protect my family,” Bryan said.

Jim nodded.

“I can understand that,” he said. “And I understand that living on the sea isn’t for everyone.”

He checked over his shoulder, checking his men. He lowered his voice to a whisper.

“Look, there is something you could do,” he said. “But it’s risky. You should only do it if negotiations break down.”

“What?” Bryan said.

Jim took a pistol out of his waistband. He handed it to Bryan.

“It’s not loaded,” he said. “If the situation arises, you should grab me and hold me hostage. I can’t guarantee Stoneheart will care if I die or not, but it might give him pause.”

“Why are you helping us?” Bryan said.

“Call me cursed,” Jim said. “Everyone else on board does.”

“Cursed?” Cassie said. “Cursed with what?”

“A conscience,” Jim said. “It’s a weakness aboard the Celeste. It’s gotten many a man killed over the years.”

“That’s great news,” Cassie said, rolling her eyes.

Bryan tucked the pistol in his pants, hiding it under his shirt.

“You’re a good man,” Bryan said.

“Keep it down,” Jim said, checking over his shoulder to make sure the others couldn’t hear. “If they find that out, I’ll end up joining you.”

“We heard strange noises in the sea before,” Aaron said, eying the sea with wary eyes. “Something like wild animals.”

“Monsters,” Jim said. “They live here, coming out only when the fog comes. There are stories of them growing so big they can pull whole ships under. We wouldn’t be here either if it wasn’t a matter of life and death.”

“Life and death?” Bryan said.

In response, Jim tapped a crate of rum with his foot.

“The men are tough, but everyone needs something to keep going,” Jim said. “For these boys, it’s rum.”

“Is there anything you can tell us about Stoneheart that might help?” Bryan said.

“The tales of Stoneheart are as numerous as the dimples on the high sea,” Jim said. “It’s been said he was here since the very beginning, when it’s said people first arrived in this place two hundred years ago. The legend goes there were two ships battling in heaven, pummelling one another with their cannons and tearing each other to pieces. They were both powerful warships, one held by the British, the other a strong and proud seafaring race. They battled for so long and fiercely that they churned up the water, making it turn into a whirlpool. They continued to fight as they were sucked down into the abyss, and they were both of them doomed, falling from grace, and were sunk.

“But then something miraculous happened, and they emerged back up on the surface, only it wasn’t heaven they found themselves, but in a new world. Near-drowned and half-dead, the two crews looked upon one another, both knowing they had just been spared death, and sailed their beaten ships in peace, heading in either direction. It was the only time of peace between the two. The British founded New Britain and set up towns, while the vagabonds did what they had always done, and pillaged them.

“That was when Stoneheart was born, becoming a leader amongst the thieves, leading them to victory over the British, but only at sea. On land, the British were more powerful, and they could use their farmers to make themselves stronger at sea.

“No one knows how Stoneheart is capable of living for so many years. Some say he discovered the Fountain of Youth, others that he has the ability to steal other men’s bodies, transferring himself into them. How ever he does it, he has survived this long, and he will continue to survive into the future. He is a wise and good leader, but in recent years he has become more bloodthirsty and mad, his decisions more difficult to understand, even for those of us who trust in him.”

The sun had risen and dissipated the worst of the fog, revealing a large ship. It was an old ship from the nineteenth century, with huge sails, and men high in the rigging to manipulate them. Bryan had only ever seen something like it in movies and museums.

But what put a feeling of dread in him was the sight of the flag flapping at the end of the tall mast. It grinned down at the family through its hollow

eyes as if it had planned for them to come here all along, that this was all part of an elaborate trap.

The others gasped beside him, seeing just what Bryan was looking at.

It was a Jolly Roger. These people were pirates.

They should have taken their chances on the island.

# 7

THE SHIP'S BOAT drew alongside the larger ship, a feeder fish beside a Great White. Bryan wasn't the only one to feel a knot form in the pit of his stomach. He knew the kind of men these were, the kind of things they were capable of. He was one man, and though Jim seemed like a good sort, as did the men rowing the boat as far as he could tell, he couldn't shake the feeling that when push came to shove he couldn't rely on them to have his back.

The men held a crate of rum on their shoulders and scaled the rigging with their free hands. The rest of the crew relieved them of their burden and helped pull the men on deck.

"After you," Jim said.

Bryan climbed first. He'd be able to help Zoe and Cassie onto the deck without the deckhands having to touch them. As they scaled, Zoe read the name of the ship.

"The Celeste?" Zoe said. "The Mary Celeste?"

"Yes," Jim said. "Why?"

Zoe's eyes darted left to right before she shrugged.

"No reason," she said.

Bryan helped Zoe over the side and onto the deck.

The men high in the rigging swung from rope to rope, leaping like monkeys, at home in their surroundings. Bryan felt the deck move beneath his feet, unaccustomed to unfixed surfaces. The pirates moved with an ease telling of countless hours on such roving surfaces.

The rags they wore barely covered their hard tanned bodies, their muscles thick with use, their hands rough and worn working frayed ropes. To a man they frowned under thick weatherbeaten brows. The few new clothes they wore were ill-fitting and torn along the seams. Bryan didn't like to think where they had gotten them.

The smell was overpowering, a heady mix of unwashed bodies, sea salt, wet wood, fish, and rum. The men turned to face them. Severe injuries appeared to be the norm; many sported missing eyes and limbs, and not

one of them was over the age of forty. Being a pirate was clearly a demanding occupation.

The men sized Bryan up, sniffing, poking and prying at his clothes. They tugged on them, as if wanting him to take them off and hand them over.

Jim stepped forward, a delicate action, but it had the desired effect. The men glanced at him, and then took a step back. Clearly Jim's influence extended over the entire crew. Bryan only hoped he would have the same effect over the captain. But with a name like Stoneheart, that didn't seem likely.

The pirates stepped aside as if someone had issued an order, creating a path that opened up, a human curtain, revealing an especially average figure. There was nothing about him to suggest he was the captain by his style. He could have passed for any of the other crew.

His dress shirt was dirtied brown with use and frayed at the cuffs. His boots, originally black, were worn to light brown from scuff marks. As he stepped closer, his boots thudded, deep and resonant. His men flinched with every step.

And then Bryan saw the man's face.

It was a handsome face, if a little thin. It was long, his cheekbones high, his hair black and shaggy, hanging in his eyes.

His eyes.

Dark, almost pitch in tone, glared like bottomless pools. They were the eyes of a killer, a murderer, a tyrant. His eyes moved from one family member's face to another, piercing their souls, prying into their deepest secrets.

Bryan could feel the pressure of the pistol tucked in his pants and noted Jim's insistence at maintaining close proximity.

"This is Captain Stoneheart," Jim said.

Bryan wasn't sure how to address the man. Finally, he stretched out his hand.

"I'm Bryan Angelo," he said. "This is my family. Thank you for allowing us aboard your fine ship."

Stoneheart didn't move a muscle. He could have been carved from wood for all the movement and emotion he projected. Only his eyes moved, or rather, one of them. It was in a constant state of motion. It rolled backward, looking up at the sky, and then disappeared altogether. It

was a glass eye, painted black to match his own, only it was too small for his eye socket, and it rocked and rolled too far in either direction, looking first left, and then right, and then rolled around so it wasn't visible, facing inside his head.

"You speak strange," Stoneheart said.

His voice was craggy and stiff, without much inflection. Here was a man unused to making apologies.

"I knew another man to speak as you do," he said. "He was a British spy."

"I'm not a spy," Bryan said. "None of us are. We're just a family who got lost."

"Lost," Stoneheart said. "There is no getting lost. Which side do you belong to?"

"Side?" Bryan said. "I don't know what you mean."

"Side, side," Stoneheart said in irritation. "You're clearly not pirates, so you must be British."

"We're not British," Bryan said.

"An Outlander, then?" Stoneheart said.

"I don't know what an Outlander is," Bryan said.

"Someone from the Outlands," Stoneheart said. "Almost as bad as being British."

"We're neither British nor Outlanders," Bryan said.

"Then you must be pirates," Stoneheart said. "But you don't strike me as particularly pirate-like."

"That's because we're not," Bryan said.

"Then I'm confused," Stoneheart said. "You're not pirates, British, nor Outlanders. Then you must be spirits. And spirits must be laid to rest."

The crew lifted lengths of rope and loosened knives from their belts. Black teeth glistened in reeking mouths.

"Woah, woah!" Bryan said, waving his hands. "We came here through a sinkhole. We're looking for the Passage to take us back home."

"Passage?" Stoneheart said. "You're seeking passage aboard my ship?"

"No," Bryan said. "We wish to find something called the Passage. It's a twin of the type of doorway that brought us here in the first place, only this one will take us out of here."

"There is no way out of here, save off the edge of my blade," Stoneheart said. "And I'm more than willing to share it with you."

“Thank you, but we’d prefer to leave here while we’re in one piece,” Bryan said.

“That can be arranged,” Stoneheart said. “Though you will have a few more holes in you than you currently sport.”

The pirates were getting restless, bored. Diplomacy had failed. They were going to do something if Bryan didn’t convince Stoneheart to spare them soon.

It was now or never. He needed to get the pistol out and defend his family.

He reached into his pants, gripped the pistol Jim had given him, and brought it out. It caught on his belt, twisted in his grip, and skidded across the deck.

The pirates looked from the pistol to Bryan. If Bryan had a full bladder, it would have emptied across the front of his pants at that moment. Their looks were distant, the kind he imagined that came over a murderer’s face, cold fury bubbling just below the surface.

And then one of them chuckled. It caught, and another pirate laughed. Then a third, more uproariously than the last, and it spread through the whole crew until they were all bawling like children.

“That’s enough!” Stoneheart said.

The crew stopped laughing immediately, wiping away their tears.

Jim felt at his own pants, feeling for the pistol he knew should have been there, and glared at Bryan. His performance was excellent.

Jim snapped his pistol out of the hand of a pirate who had scooped it up and slapped Bryan across the chin with it.

Bryan, wide eyed, rubbed at his stinging cheek. He knew it was all part of the show, but there was nothing fake about the pain he felt as the blood rushed to his skin and made him blush.

“Picked your pocket, did he, Jim?” Stoneheart said, amusement in his tone. “Perhaps he isn’t so useless after all.”

“Pick my pocket again, and he won’t be able to wipe his arse,” Jim said. “I’ll take his fingers from both hands.”

“Now that’s a sight I’d like to see,” Stoneheart said in a tone that suggested he might just allow that to happen.

“Though I suppose he won’t be able to perform his duties particularly well if that were to befall him,” Jim was quick to add.

“We can always stitch his digits back on after I’ve gotten my laugh,” Stoneheart said.

“Sure,” Jim said. “I suppose he doesn’t need his fingers for telling tales.”

“Tales?” Stoneheart said.

“Yes,” Jim said. “Didn’t I tell you? They’re from the surface.”

Stoneheart ran his one remaining eye over the family, before finally fixing Jim with a squint.

“You’re certain of this?” Stoneheart said.

“They told me about it on the way here,” Jim said. “They have a great number of stories.”

Stoneheart thought for a full minute before pursing his lips and making a pop noise.

“Haul up the anchor, we’re casting off,” he said.

“What of the prisoners?” a pirate—Bryan recognized him as Smithy—said.

“Prisoners?” Stoneheart said. “I see no prisoners. I see four new recruits. Give them their duties.”

He turned on his heel and headed back to his cabin, slamming the door behind himself.

“You heard the captain!” Jim said. “We’re casting off!”

The crew were suddenly alive with activity, rushing about the deck.

“Thank you,” Zoe said to Jim. “I thought we were going to be forced into a sticky position then.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Jim said. “We haven’t even cast off yet. I can already see half a dozen knives flashing in their scabbards.”

The family cast looks over their shoulders, but didn’t see any exposed knives. That worried them even more. They might be alive at the moment, but for how much longer?

# 8

THE LACK of sleep was beginning to catch up to the family. It didn't help the chores they'd been assigned were menial in nature and did not require the use of more than a single brain cell, lulling them into a zombie-like trance. The tasks were so simple a trained monkey could have carried them out, which was fortunate, as they were about the capability of the average crew member.

Cassie and Aaron performed each task, predominantly cleaning and scrubbing, as if it was the worst thing they had ever had to do in their lives. Perhaps it was. In a less life-threatening situation Bryan might have considered it a valuable learning experience for the youngsters.

The heat was stifling, overbearing. They might have been in an oven. Bryan hadn't worked his body this hard since he was a teenager on old man Mason's farm. Bryan may have attempted to bribe the good captain, unfortunately he doubted US dollars would count much to a man down here, underground, where slips of funny green paper was of less value to him than a new sharp blade and someone to insert it in.

And Bryan knew who those bodies might belong to.

Each time Bryan glanced up, he caught hungry eyes hastily turning away, and the sudden need to redouble their efforts on the task in hand.

Zoe and Cassie covered themselves up the best they could, but no matter how many clothes they put on, how much effort they put into ensuring they did not look nor move in a provocative way, they seemed to be the center of attention for the crew. They were dogs in heat and there was little the girls could do about it. Hopefully, their fear of Stoneheart outweighed their base desires.

"You know, you don't need to worry so much," Jim said to them some hours later. "The captain has vouchsafed your safety, and none of the crewmembers are stupid enough to break them."

"I'm not so sure," Bryan said. "I saw a fly enter a sailor's cauliflower ear earlier and I could swear it flew out the other side a few minutes later."

Jim chuckled.

“There aren’t many scientists here, I admit,” he said. “But they’re not so bad once you get to know them. They’re simple men with little in the way of formal education, but you don’t need to be all that smart to know the rights and wrongs of the world.”

“And yet they were quite happy, ready to cut me open at a single word from your captain,” Bryan said.

“From your perspective it might seem that way,” Jim said. “From theirs, it looks a lot like loyalty.”

“No doubt that’s what it looked like to Hitler with his German officers too,” Bryan grumbled under his breath.

The family was grateful when the sun began to set, their duties finally coming to an end. They were ushered below deck to the common room. Their meal today, as it would be every day until the chef ran out of ingredients, was rat stew. The chef would then be forced to come up with another meal, something that didn’t require all the ingredients of the previous menu, and therefore less tasty as a result.

The family sat at their own table, aware of the other diners, who seemed to take a great deal of time over the last few bites of their meal, followed by a very close inspection of the broken prongs at the end of their forks, which unerringly pointed in the direction of the estranged family sitting in the corner of the room.

“What were you talking about before, about the Mary Celeste?” Aaron said to Zoe as he shoveled the tepid water into his mouth.

“The Mary Celeste was a ship discovered off the coast of the Azores in 1872,” Zoe said. “She was in good condition, but her crew was missing, disappeared. It’s said the last captain’s log was made ten days previous to her discovery, the meals cooked and undisturbed in the kitchen, the crew’s belongings still stored. No one knows what happened to her crew. They just disappeared.”

“You think they got sucked down a sinkhole?” Bryan said.

“It would explain a few things, don’t you think?” Zoe said.

“If that’s true, how did the Mary Celeste get down here?” Cassie said.

“Maybe she didn’t,” Zoe said. “But the crew rebuilt her and christened her down here.”

“Mystery solved,” Aaron said.

“A sinkhole at sea?” Cassie said. “Is that even possible? I thought sinkholes only happened on land.”

“They’re recesses in the land that give way,” Zoe said. “They can happen just about anywhere.”

“I wonder what a sinkhole at sea would look like,” Cassie said.

“I don’t know,” Zoe said. “Hopefully we’ll never have to see one.”

The family hastily finished their meals and staggered up the steps back to the main deck. They were so tired they could sleep just about anywhere. They were ushered to the captain’s cabin. Were they going to be treated to a nice place to sleep? It would have been a cherry on top of their catastrophe of a day.

The family didn’t trust the captain as far as they could throw him, but they did have respect for his young apprentice. He had rescued them on two separate occasions, each time without asking for anything in return. The family were discovering altruism was not a common element in this world, and should be seized upon whenever it reared its head above the parapets.

If these worlds, as Zoe referred to them, were any indication of humanity’s origins, they were all dog-eat-dog landscapes. It was easy to see the ovens where humanity’s less desirable aspects had been baked.

It was dark and musty in the captain’s room. It wasn’t altogether spacious and they had to get comfortable with one another if they were all to fit.

There were paintings on the walls, some of which Zoe recognized as missing works of the masters. They had probably gotten sucked down the sinkholes long ago. It belied a depth to the captain’s character that had heretofore not made itself apparent.

Zoe supposed the captain couldn’t be an altogether bad person if he had an interest in art. But then, she supposed many of the world’s tyrants had been into art too, and so it was not a reliable indicator of character.

The aroma of the food in the room heightened the family’s senses. The spread on the table was fit for a king, and Zoe supposed that on this ship, that was essentially what the captain was. What he said, went.

She had seen the kind of awful things the crew were willing to do for their captain, their king, and whether they enjoyed it or not was of no concern. The king commanded it, and they carried it out.

Schubert played from a small music box at the back of the room, and candles burned low with use at either end of the table. It was an opulence

that did not exist on the rest on the ship. Zoe was certain it would not have been appreciated by the rest of the crew in any case.

The feast was cooked to perfection, and it was hard to believe the chefs in the food hall below were capable of producing such marvels. It went to show how skill depended largely on the materials one had to create them.

“Please sit,” Stoneheart said.

The family didn’t need to be told twice. They fell into their seats. They were hungry, despite their earlier meal. Even if they weren’t, they all knew the chances of being able to eat like this again might not come for some time.

“Uh uh,” Stoneheart said. “I said ‘sit’, not ‘eat’.”

It was a curious place to sit without eating, Bryan thought. He began to get a sense of the kind of toying Stoneheart appeared to enjoy.

“How was your first day aboard the Celeste?” Stoneheart said.

“Exhausting,” Bryan said.

“Good,” Stoneheart said. “We wouldn’t want you to get to your destination without learning the kind of hard work we undertake here.”

“I’ve decided we will take you to a port where you might be able to locate the information you desire,” Stoneheart said.

It was a huge relief, and it showed as the family’s shoulders relaxed. The tense atmosphere reduced by a shade or two.

“Thank you,” Bryan said. “And we promise to do the work you need of us, without complaint. I understand we need to pay for our passage. How long do you think it will take to get there?”

“A couple of days,” Stoneheart said.

“That long?” Bryan said, a little deflated.

“As fast as the wind blows,” Stoneheart said.

Bryan’s body ached at all the work he would have to do in those forty-eight hours. A map hung from a wall. It was colored in pastel shades: blues, greens and yellows. The towns were for the most part small and spaced far apart, with foreign Scandinavian-sounding names.

But the most curious thing about the map was it was not complete. It showed the right half of the world, but little of the left-hand side, as if no one had dared venture into it. But Bryan could see there was a large landmass behind that shroud of emptiness.

“You’re admiring my map?” Stoneheart said. “It’s as complete as anyone’s in the world.”

“Why is there a large blank space?” Bryan said.

“That’s British territory,” Stoneheart said. “No pirate has ventured into their lands and come back to tell of what they saw. The British hate us every bit as much as we hate them.”

“Where were we discovered?” Bryan said.

“The Devil Isles,” Stoneheart said.

He gestured with a fork that had skewered a thick slice of pork slathered with gravy.

“Right here,” he said.

The Demon Isles were center-north on the map, as far from the British lands as they were from the pirate lands. There was a picture of a monster. It had the torso of a man and legs of a giant squid. He held an item in either hand: an old style key in one, and a small chest in the other. Bryan recognized it as the same kind of emblem many maps from that time period had.

“There’s just a picture,” Bryan said. “Where are the islands?”

“The only blank spot on this side of the world,” Stoneheart said. “With the fog that sweeps in, bringing the monster, there isn’t a pirate alive who would willingly head into those waters. Many a ship has been lost in those waters.”

The horrific haunting sounds Bryan heard in the fog that night on the island came unbidden to his mind.

“You’re lucky to be alive,” Stoneheart said.

“We heard them,” Bryan said. “The monsters. But we didn’t see them. It could have been anything.”

“No,” Stoneheart said. “You know what you heard.”

Bryan’s mouth felt dry. It was entirely possible some forgotten creature from the ancient world had survived, sucked through a sinkhole into this world. This world's version of Loch Ness. *Except this one is real*.

“And where are we heading?” Bryan said.

“To New London,” Stoneheart said.

It was one of the few locations drawn on the British landmass. It was a large town that straddled an outcropping of land surrounded on three sides by the sea.

“The Passage is on the British side?” Bryan said.

“If it was on our side we would have found it already,” Stoneheart said.

“Do you think the British know its location?” Bryan said.

Stoneheart munched on a roast potato and shrugged his shoulders.

“Who knows what they know,” Stoneheart said. “In the meantime, I would very much like to hear everything you can tell me about the surface.”

“What would you like to know?” Bryan said.

Stoneheart smiled like a small boy, rubbing his hands together. He leaned forward in his chair.

“Is it true about mermaids?” he said. “Do they sing beautiful songs and lure sailors out to sea and drag them below the surface?”

“Well, there are stories…” Bryan said, but he cut himself off when he saw the look on Jim’s face, the subtle shake of his head. Coupled with the look of disappointment growing on Stoneheart’s face, it was a clear message. “I mean, yes. Of course there are mermaids. Everything you say is true.”

Stoneheart grinned and banged the dining table with his fist.

“I knew it!” he said, turning to Jim. “What did I tell you?”

“You’ve never met anyone from the surface before?” Bryan said.

“No,” Stoneheart said. “Only imposters, sent by the British to assassinate me. But I saw through their lies. If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s sniffing out lies. Now, tell me more about these mermaids.”

“Uh, well, they’re very pretty,” Bryan said.

“Pretty?” Stoneheart said, growing disappointed again.

“Beautiful,” Bryan said.

“More beautiful even than the rays of light from a setting sun,” Aaron said. “And the melancholy cries of a life wasted, a forlorn disparagement that comes from losing bit by bit their soul when they commit each murder.”

“Yes?” Stoneheart said, on the edge of his seat now. “And how do they make themselves happier? How do they ease their sense of loss?”

“They were each born with a betrothed,” Aaron said. “And they each lost them, sometimes in the battles between the various clans, and sometimes in the raging storms that reach deep down to the depths of the oceans and slam the merpeople against the sharp rocks along the seafloor. They take the lives of ordinary men to satisfy themselves, to make up for the loss they suffered all those years ago, and when they kiss the men-”

“They kiss the men?” Stoneheart said. “Why would they do such a thing? Because they’re hungry for affection?”

“Yes,” Aaron said. “And no. They yearn for love, need it to fill the hole in their souls, but they can never fill it. But they hope, despite the truth, despite knowing they will never fill that part of themselves again, that it will remain forever empty. They try to fill it, at the cost of a man’s life. It refills their heart, and for a short time they are complete again.”

Stoneheart, belying his name and reputation, had tears in his eyes. He leaned back.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes. That’s what I thought. Aaron. That’s your name, isn’t it? I would like very much for you to come to me every night and tell me about your world. Can you do that for me?”

Aaron’s expression froze. He’d just dug his own grave. He clearly wasn’t interested in doing anything of the sort, and by excelling at storytelling, he had condemned himself to having to do it every night. If he were to disappoint the captain, if one of his stories failed to give him the thrill of excitement he desired, he knew very well what his, and his family’s, fate would be.

“But it will be some days before we arrive,” Stoneheart said. “And we’ll have to keep ourselves entertained until then.”

Zoe looked down at her wine, and then her eyes flicked up to Stoneheart. His was an unflinching gaze, the kind she was sure every killer possessed. His glass eye rolled in its socket and made her sick to her stomach.

“Eat up,” Stoneheart said.

It was enough for Zoe to lose her appetite, especially since she then noticed the captain hadn’t touched any of the food from the table himself, only that which was on his plate to begin with.

Zoe sat her fork down on the table. The others saw that, their forks already laden with food. They hadn’t yet taken a bite of the food either and, with great disappointment, sat their own forks down.

“Not hungry?” Stoneheart said.

“No,” Zoe said. “I think we ought to go to sleep. It’s been a long day.”

“There will be many more long days ahead,” Stoneheart said. “Sweet dreams.”

Stoneheart grinned around the slice of steak he thrust into his mouth and munched on it with relish, letting the juices run down his chin. The food wasn’t poisoned after all. It was a test. He didn’t want them to eat,

and now he took joy in them all knowing they had just passed up the best meal they could hope to have for the next few days, possibly even weeks.

Jim led the family out of the cabin and below deck.

“I didn’t know you were such a good storyteller,” Cassie said to Aaron.

“I’m not,” Aaron said. “But the childhood authors I read were. I just retold their stories, as well as I could remember, anyway.”

“You can recall the stories from your childhood?” Cassie said, shaking her head in disbelief. “I can barely remember what I did last week, nevermind from my childhood.”

Aaron shrugged.

“We all have our talents,” he said.

“Yes,” Cassie said. “But some are more useful than others.”

“It depends on our situation,” Aaron said. “I doubt I could have outrun a T-Rex when it mattered.”

“But you would have probably avoided the whole need to run in the first place,” Cassie said. “I know which situation I would prefer.”

“And if I failed to recognize the threat before it was too late?” Aaron said.

It was Cassie’s turn to shrug.

“Then I guess it would be useful to be able to run,” she said.

They came to a small room half crammed with empty ceramic pots. There was a small space on the floor.

“This is the best I could organize for you at short notice,” Jim said. “It’s just about big enough for you all to sleep in if you arrange yourselves carefully.”

“It’s great,” Bryan said. “Thank you, Jim.”

“I put a chamber pot in the corner,” Jim said. “It’s got a crack in it, so it’s best to make sure it leans over at an angle like it currently is. Otherwise it might spill.”

“There’s no toilet?” Zoe said.

“There is,” Jim said. “But I wouldn’t suggest any of you go wandering about the ship at night.”

“We understand,” Bryan said. “Thank you.”

“Sweet dreams,” Jim said.

He bowed and left them, closing the door behind himself.

“So that’s it then,” Zoe said. “We live like slaves for two days until we can get away from here.”

“Yes,” Bryan said. “But we will get out of here. That’s got to be worth working for, hasn’t it?”

# 9

SKINNY DRAGGED a large net tangled with sprigs of seaweed and moss over the side of the ship and tossed it onto the deck at Zoe's feet.

Zoe untangled the mass, stripped the struggling fish, and placed them into wooden buckets. She carried them to a canvas spread across the deck and upended the fish over it.

Bryan floundered to catch the flapping fish. Once caught, he sliced open its belly with a sharp knife, tossing the innards in another bucket. Watching the fish writhe, fighting for its life, made Zoe want to throw up every lunch she had ever had.

Once the bucket was full Bryan dumped the refuse back into the sea. Hungry seagulls and other creatures under the sea were on hand to take advantage.

Aaron swabbed the deck with a dirty mop. He worked from one end of the deck to the other, and when he turned around, found the deck was just as dirty as it was when he'd started, the crew having crossed the deck as they went about their own chores. He turned back to start cleaning again.

Cassie worked high in the rigging, sewing tears in the sails with a bodkin needle. The waves rocked back and forth, making her bob like the arm of a metronome. Zoe had lost count of the times she'd heard the slop of Cassie's vomit hitting the deck.

Somehow she always managed to miss the crew, or perhaps they were smart enough to avoid moving underneath wherever she was at any given moment. Aaron dutifully mopped up the mess, pushing it over the side.

Swabbing the deck had several advantages. First, it allowed Aaron to move freely, socializing with the crew. Once Aaron got used to the way the crew traversed the ship, he devised a more efficient way of cleaning, ensuring the deck was always kept moderately clean.

The crew liked a clean deck and were impressed with Aaron's work ethic. They began by ribbing him, making fun of how he mopped, that he was born to the job, that he should have been born a woman. He struck back at them with thorny barbs that made them laugh. He'd unwittingly

passed their test. They began to teach him about cannon maintenance and how to shoot them.

They took breaks when Stoneheart wasn't around, and taught Aaron to play a game called Dead Man's poker. He was good too. He had won two silver coins and an old man's lunch in his first few hands. They labeled it beginner's luck, but if that was true, he was turning out to be a very slow improver indeed, and would remain a beginner forever.

The first day took every painstaking minute with as much discomfort as it could muster. And after dinner, Aaron's duties still weren't over. Aaron, escorted by Zoe, entered the captain's quarters and gave him the bedtime stories he craved.

That's what they were, Zoe thought. Adult bedtime fairy stories. Stoneheart fell asleep after hearing them, his questions coming fewer and far between, his eyelids drooping and heavy, until his face rested in his plate of food. He no longer offered any to them. The trick had played its purpose and he knew it wouldn't work a second time.

Zoe could have buried a knife in the captain right then and there, faster than Jim could prevent her. But what would happen to them then? Who would take command? Any other member of the crew, save Jim, would have resulted in a far worse predicament.

The men still leered at her and Cassie, but that was all they did. And the few men Aaron had befriended leered a great deal less than the others. She even thought they might defend them if the odds weren't too greatly stocked against them.

Stoneheart's snoring made the cutlery rattle on the table. His glass eye continued to revolve around in its oversized socket, sometimes appearing to glare at them, other times to roll back as if it too was falling asleep.

Aaron had stopped talking, his own chin resting on his chest. Zoe poked him awake, placing her hand over his mouth to prevent his snort of alarm. The last thing she wanted to do was wake the captain. Then Aaron would have to continue with his tales.

Zoe led Aaron out the door, careful to shut it quietly behind him.

"Good job, Aaron," Zoe said. "Now let's get back to Cassie and Bryan. I don't like to be exposed like this."

The door to the captain's quarters opened. Jim bit into an apple and let the door slam shut. Zoe glared at him for risking the possibility he might wake the captain.

“Don’t worry, he’s fast asleep,” Jim said. “Nothing can wake him once he starts snoring.”

“We’d hardly be able to leave otherwise,” Zoe said shortly.

“The captain hasn’t slept this well in years,” Jim said.

“I’m not surprised with how he sleeps,” Zoe said. “Why doesn’t he sleep in his bed and not at the dining table?”

“Old habits die hard, I guess,” Jim said. “Here.”

He handed Zoe a small basket of apples.

“Thanks,” Zoe said.

“No, thank you,” Jim said. “It’s a small thank you from the crew. When the captain sleeps well, they can all sleep well.”

And now that Zoe peered around, she saw the deck was practically empty, save for the presence of a sleepy skeleton crew.

“Jim, how much longer before we reach the port?” Zoe said.

“The captain said it would take a couple of days,” Jim said. “So, by the day after tomorrow, I guess.”

“This world must be huge,” Zoe said. “The last world we were in, we could see the opposite end by standing on the bluff of a hill.”

“But not big enough,” Aaron said. “Or else there wouldn’t be a war.”

Jim grinned. It wasn’t unkind, but there was a sardonic edge to it.

“You have a lot to learn about the nature of man,” he said. “Man will fight not because he wants to, but because he must. It is his nature. He will always desire what other men have. This war is an everlasting one. It’ll never end, unlike the one from your own history.

“Eventually the pirates were wiped out in your world. But not here. There should be enough space for two sets of people, but they are both too greedy, always hungry for power.”

“I hope someone comes up with a way to end it soon,” Zoe said. “War helps no one but the arms manufacturers.”

“There is only one way to end the war,” Jim said. “By the two sides coming together, whether that requires one to overpower the other, I don’t know. But that isn’t likely to happen anytime soon.”

He hopped down off the barrel.

“I’d better go put the captain to bed,” he said. “Before he drowns himself in gravy.”

# 10

A BELL rang with undisguised urgency.

The family started awake at the same moment. The previous day's heavy workload and the ship's gentle rocking conspired to send them all into a near comatose-like state, the creaking wood making anything but sleep impossible.

They awoke with wide eyes, peering around at their featureless room. Their faces may have been ringed with the deep wrinkles of groggy sleep, but their eyes were bright and alert.

"What is it?" Aaron said, the first to find his tongue.

"I don't know," Bryan said. "We'd better get up and go see."

It was the last thing any of them wanted to do. Cassie had commandeered some sailcloth the crew were going to cut up into rag cloths, but she had managed to convince them to let her have it, at least until they disembarked for the port.

It was not clean, and bore stains of use from bird excrement, and though the family attempted to clean it of such blemishes, there was no way to remove the smell.

The family untangled themselves from the blanket and opened the door. Bryan was almost run down by a trio of crewmembers before he could take a full step out the door.

Shouts rang out in the air, something Bryan recognized immediately from all the pirate movies he'd seen as a kid.

"Ship ahoy!" the shouts said. "Ship ahoy!"

The voice was almost drowned out by the incessant ringing of the bell. The family joined the rest of the crew on the main deck. The crew was busy lining up the canons and loading them with large heavy black balls.

It was pitch black, in the dead of night. There was a pleasant chill in the air. The waves pressed against the Mary Celeste's hull as if attempting to slow it down, preventing it from approaching the ship they were currently chasing down.

"Is it British?" a shipmate with a peg leg called, predictably, Peg Leg said.

“Hard to tell,” another shipmate said. “Looks like a fishing vessel to me.”

Bryan looked back at the wheel located at the stern of the ship on a raised platform. Stoneheart was at the wheel, bellowing orders Bryan had a hard time understanding. He was directing the Mary Celeste toward the fishing vessel. It was rapidly growing as they approached.

The wind blew against their clothes, cutting through them like razor wire. As they drew closer, Bryan could see the other ship was nowhere near the size of the Mary Celeste.

It had a pair of large empty nets hanging above its deck. With a ravenous crew of pirates on your tail, you tended not to be in the mood for fishing. They were running for their lives, but had no chance against a vessel such as the Mary Celeste.

“Think they ran aground somewhere?” Smithy said. “Why else would they let themselves enter our waters?”

“Or their navigator ain’t a lot of good,” Earl said. “Whatever the reason, they shouldn’t have come so far into our waters.”

“They’ll get taught a valuable lesson now, don’t you think?” Skinny said.

“One they’ll never forget,” Earl said. “That’s for sure.”

“Ain’t no ship in these waters as can match the Celeste,” Skinny said with more than a hint of pride.

The fishing ship was drawing up fast. Bryan gripped the guardrail, preparing for impact. The aft sails lowered, reducing their speed. Then the mainsail fell, and the Celeste made a sharp turn, pulling alongside the trawler. The crew of the other ship was already assembled on their deck, hands raised above their heads.

“On your knees!” Jim shouted.

Jim and a dozen other men tossed hooks onto the fishing trawler’s deck. They sliced through the soft wood like clawed fingernails as they were pulled in, and then leapt up, and hooked into the guardrail.

The men pulled hard on the ropes, pulling the boats as close together as possible, and then lowered a series of planks that bridged the gap.

Jim and half a dozen men took to the fishing trawler, armed to the teeth with cutlasses, sabres, daggers, pistols and rifles. They hissed at the men on the deck, spitting in their faces and delivering a few warning kicks to their guts.

The fishermen bawled, crying and gibbering like children. The fishing trawler crew dropped immediately, heads lowered in desperate prayer. More than one wet himself.

Stoneheart's silver-studded boots thudded heavily and with great foreboding on the boards as he crossed to the fishing trawler. He cast an eye over the hunched figures, eyes fixed studiously on the deck before them.

"Maggots," he said. "Maggots sucking the lifeblood of a still living, powerful monster. Don't you know enough to stay away from dangerous creatures? You are in pirate waters, Stoneheart seas. And you dare to come fish our waters? You mean to starve us out of house and home?"

The men cowered, terrified and unable to speak.

"Do you know how a man gains a reputation as a bloodthirsty tyrant?" Stoneheart said. "With careful maintenance. He is a murdering psychopath, who kills all he comes across. But today I'm feeling merciful. I shall kill just one of you. Which of you would care to make the sacrifice to save his fellow crewmembers? Do we have any volunteers?"

He cast an eye over the men on their knees.

"No?" he said. "Not one of you? How disappointing. Then you shall all die."

He lowered his pistol at the fishermen. His men followed suit. The fishermen gibbered.

"Me," one of the fishermen said. He was old, with a thick white beard. "I'll die."

Stoneheart flicked the hammer off his pistol and raised it to his shoulder, aiming at the sky.

"We have ourselves a hero," he said with a grin.

He approached the old man and kneeled in front of him.

"What's your name, sir?" he said.

"Larson, sir," the old fisherman said.

"Nice to meet you, Larson," Stoneheart said. "Why did you volunteer?"

"I'm old," Larson said. "These other boys are young. It seems a better trade than anything else we might get."

"Except from your perspective," Stoneheart said.

Larson shrugged.

"It's the way of the world," he said. "Ain't no fairness to be found, save at the end of a pistol. My life in exchange for theirs. Shoot me. I'm ready."

“Good man,” Stoneheart said.

He pulled back the hammer of his pistol, took aim at the old man’s head, and pulled the trigger. Larson was knocked bodily to one side, his small shriveled form striking the deck.

*Stoneheart by name, stone heart by nature*. Bryan had to remind himself there was a reason men attained such reputations. It was with dark deeds and steel cold nerves. This was the true Stoneheart. Callous, cruel, a sadist.

The men on their knees stared with grim intensity at the lifeless body spilled across their deck, at what until recently had been a friend, and likely Skipper, of their little trawler.

“Listen up,” Stoneheart said. “This is your first and only warning. Never come into our waters again. Do so, and you will not live to tell the tale. Am I understood?”

The men nodded in acceptance. Stoneheart tucked his pistol in his pants and turned to his men.

“Get Larson’s body on the Celeste,” he said.

“Let us take his body,” one of the fishermen said. “Please. He deserves a proper burial.”

“He will get a proper burial,” Stoneheart said, “in the belly of every one of my men.”

The fishermen’s eyes boggled. Stoneheart’s men picked up the limp old man’s body and carried it across the planks to the deck of the Mary Celeste.

The hooks were released, the planks withdrawn, and the Celeste peeled away from the trawler. The fishermen aboard got to their feet and hoisted their sails.

Bryan glared hard at Stoneheart as he passed, catching his eye.

“What’s the matter?” Stoneheart said. “Surprised at the behavior of a pirate?”

Bryan’s instinct was to turn away, to avert his gaze, but he didn’t. The captain made a hacking ‘Ha!’ laugh, before returning to his quarters.

Bryan was filled with dread, with utter hopelessness at their situation. The worn flimsy hand of Larson seemed to beckon him as the crew carried his body below deck. Bryan was filled with a dark feeling of premonition, and for ten minutes he couldn’t speak, and dwelled on their situation.

He pulled Zoe to one side.

“We have to get off this boat,” he said.

“We will,” Zoe said. “When we get to New London.”

“We’re not going to New London,” Bryan said. “I’m quite certain of it.”

“What do you mean?” Zoe said. “The captain said he would take us there.”

“Do you honestly trust the word of a man who does the kind of thing we just witnessed?” Bryan said.

“No,” Zoe said. “Of course not. But I trust Jim.”

“So would I,” Bryan said. “But how much can we trust someone whose master won’t allow him to breathe a word of the truth to us?”

A pair of pirates passed them. Bryan pulled Zoe closer to the railing.

“Then what do you suggest we do?” Zoe said.

“We wait till we’re within sight of land, then when it’s dark we’ll steal one of their ship’s boats,” Bryan said. “We’ll get ourselves onto the land and make our way to New London.”

“But we’re safe here,” Zoe said.

“For as long as Aaron’s stories continue to entertain Stoneheart,” Bryan said. “And as soon as he tires of them, we’ll share the same fate as the old fisherman. Life has no value to Stoneheart. Only pain.”

# 11

SKINNY PULLED on the ropes, bringing the flag down. He could still only use one arm, the other still hanging from his neck in a dirty rag sling. Removing the flag proved an even more difficult challenge. If it was anyone else, Bryan might have felt sorry for him and leant a hand, but he decided to leave Skinny alone. He'd brought this on himself.

Skinny proceeded to fold the Jolly Roger, taking care to do so, and then took a new flag out of a shiny ornate box. This one was pristine, with not a blemish on it, and for a split second, having caught the colors, Bryan double took, thinking it was the old Star Spangled banner, but as Skinny hoisted the flag up, the wind caught it, making it flutter, revealing Bryan's mistake. It was the British Union Jack.

A strange transformation came over the crew. Every few minutes there was another member no longer sporting their usual dirty rags, but a smart uniform. But you could not change the nature of a man with a superficial change of clothing. More than one man reached behind and scratched his buttocks.

"These underpants scratch something awful," Earl said. "I don't know how any man in His Majesty's army is supposed to fight in this getup."

Zoe sidled up close to Bryan.

"What do you think is happening?" she said.

"I don't know," Bryan said. "We're heading somewhere where they don't want to be recognized as pirates, I suppose."

And then it occurred to him.

"Remember those fishermen?" he said.

Zoe grimaced.

"How can I not?" she said.

"The pirates were angry because they came within the pirates' jurisdiction," Bryan said. "I guess we're now heading into British waters."

Hope sprung in Bryan's chest. Perhaps Stoneheart was going to keep his word after all.

But if the family thought that meant the pirates would be landing soon, they were to be disappointed. It was another day of backbreaking

labor before the Mary Celeste came across land. If Bryan hadn't known better, he would have said the captain was deliberately keeping them out at sea. But there was no way to live at sea indefinitely.

Eventually you had to make for land to get the items required for survival. Without rum to blur their reality, the men began to grow restless. No matter how evil or disagreeable a captain was, he had to eventually give in to such demands, or else face mutiny.

The family stayed up late into the night figuring out plans for escape. Anything they attempted would likely be the first and only chance they would get. And so they planned and planned until each of them knew the plans inside out.

They considered consulting with Jim, as he knew the boat inside and out and could aid them no end in their escape. He had saved their lives twice, and was a good friend. But he owed them no fealty. He had shown his hand. His loyalty belonged to the captain, no matter how cruel he was, no matter how badly he treated his charge, no matter how unfair, Jim was always at his side.

Bryan had seen Jim's type before: the undervalued assistant at his master's beck and call day and night. It was a strange kind of relationship, difficult, though not infallible. Jim was to Stoneheart what Brute was to Caesar. But even Brute eventually became aware of the terrible power his good friend Caesar wielded. So too could Jim. But not yet.

They came to a landmass, much larger than the desert island they had previously found themselves. The land rounded either side and faded into the distance. It was decorated with thick tufts of trees and probably wasn't even an island. And though the night was quickly closing in, there appeared to be no choking fog descending upon them.

A perfect place to hide a family.

The crew descended in one of the ship's boats, heading onto the island to conduct their usual retrieval of hidden booze. Zoe locked eyes with Bryan, who shook his head. Now was not the time to attempt their escape. They would do so at night, while everyone else was asleep.

In another twist of luck during a game of Dead Man's poker, Aaron discovered who would be on sentry duty in the crow's nest.

Emanuel was the worst drunk amongst the deckhands, which was saying something. It was no secret he had a hidden stash, or perhaps several, somewhere aboard the Celeste. He often dipped into it, but no one could

ever seem to stumble across Emanuel redhanded. During the night of the family's planned escape, he would be boozing it up within the hidden confines of the crow's nest.

The plan was set, and the conditions were as good as they could be.

The men came back from their scavenger mission after a short interlude with a large cache. They hauled the crate aboard the ship. It hit the deck hard, the glass bottles rattling inside.

"Be careful, you fools!" Smithy said. "This is rum! Not your working girl of a wife! It needs to be treated with care and respect!"

"Who are you calling a working girl?" a crewman said, fists clenched tight.

The other crewmen descended on the crate, hardly even needing the crowbar to pry the lid up. They could have done as easily with their own fingers, splinters or no. They tossed the lid aside and reached into the crate, seizing a pair of bottles each.

"Easy fellas," Jim said. "You know we need to ration it."

"Screw the rations!" Peg Leg said. "We haven't had a taste in days!"

"Then you ought to take it easy in any case," Jim said. "Give it here, I'll make sure you all get your fair share."

The men grumbled and handed back their bottles.

"Roberts, is that a bottle in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?" Jim said.

"It's just the way the good lord made me," Robert said.

"No one gets a drop until we have all the bottles accounted for," Jim said, putting the lid back on the crate.

"All right, all right," Roberts said indignantly.

If he didn't hand the bottle over, he would have lost it in any case, as well as a couple of fingers, the crew were so agitated.

The two men in charge of hauling the ship's boat back up to the deck were making slow progress, the ship's boat no more than a yard from the surface. Their attention was fixated almost entirely on the kerfuffle taking place on deck. The men licked their chapped lips in anticipation of their share of the rum as Jim began handing it out.

"We'll take care of the ship's boat," Bryan said. "You go enjoy the rum."

The crewmen looked from Bryan to the rum crate. The anticipation proved too much, and he all but threw the rope at Bryan, letting the ship's

boat slide back to the water's surface.

Bryan wanted to do this for the simple reason it was good practice. Getting a feel for the weight and required pressure meant it would be all the easier when they did it for real. This was their dry run.

Zoe took hold of the twin rope, and together they hauled, pulling at the same rate, with the aim of bringing the ship's boat level. They got it halfway up when Bryan felt they'd got the hang of it.

"Now lower it," Bryan said.

This was the crucial practice they really needed—to lower it back down to the sea so they could make their escape.

"You're meant to be bringing it up," Jim said. "Not lowering it."

Bryan's heart leapt in his throat.

"The rope…" he said, searching for the second half of his sentence. "It got tangled in the pulley."

Jim kept his eyes fastened on Bryan. Did he believe a word Bryan had said? Bryan couldn't tell. Then Jim reached for the rope.

"When that happens, you need to pull on it sharply like this, and then let it drop again," he said. "If it keeps getting stuck, then one of you needs to climb down into the ship's boat and sort it out down there. But it appears my words are for nought. The rope isn't stuck."

"I managed to unstick it right before you arrived," Bryan said lamely.

"That's fortunate," Jim said.

"Not fortunate," Bryan said with a coy grin. "Just good old common sense."

"The thing with sticky ropes is it's easy for one rope to get tangled with another, more innocent one," Jim said. "If you're not careful, it can ruin the whole system."

He turned his body ever so slightly. Bryan picked up on the movement and turned to look at what Jim was surreptitiously gesturing to. Aaron and Cassie were on the opposite side of the deck leaning over the side, pointing at something they found worthy of their attention.

"A rope is just a tool," Jim said. "It has many uses, depending on what the user wishes to use it for. It can be used to haul up a ship's boat, or it can be used for other, more nefarious, purposes."

He curled the rope around and tied a slipknot, forming a noose.

"You have to be careful," Jim said, leaning in close. "Some people are just a few strands thick, liable to snapping and breaking at any time. Am I

being clear?”

Bryan nodded.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice barely registering as a croak. He cleared his throat and spoke again. “Yes. Very clear.”

Jim handed the rope back to Bryan so he and Zoe could continue hauling the ship’s boat up. They did, swinging the boat over and placing it gently on the deck. They curled the rope around the cleats.

“Do you think Jim is onto us?” Zoe said.

“I don’t know,” Bryan said. “He suspects something, but I don’t think he’ll tell anyone. He was warning us to be careful.”

“Do you still want to try tonight?” Zoe said.

“If we don’t, we’re dead anyway,” Bryan said. “Eventually the captain will get bored with Aaron’s stories, and where will that leave us? We’ll be deadweight, like the fishermen. To him, a human being is only useful if it serves a purpose. If it loses that purpose, it’s disposable.”

“But he won’t dispose of us if we attempt the escape and fail?” Zoe said.

“I hope we won’t have to find out,” Bryan said.

# 12

TONIGHT THE CAPTAIN was interested in Melville's masterpiece Moby Dick. How he came to know of that particular tale, Aaron didn't know. But he didn't appear to be aware it was just that: a story.

He was principally concerned with the fateful sailor's motivation, why he became so obsessed with the whale, why it was all he could think of, why he allowed it to eventually take his life.

Aaron didn't have all the answers, and was too tired to think. At such times he fell back on Stoneheart's intellect to answer his own questions, sometimes even asking him directly: "What do you think?"

Stoneheart sat in silence for some time before speaking.

"Obsession is a young man's game," he said. "Or perhaps just a fool's. It takes its toll, stripping away everything you are, until you're left a shell of your former self."

He turned to look at the map on the wall, peering at the blank half of the world.

Eventually, the same signs of lethargy and exhaustion came over Stoneheart. His eyes drooped, his words came slow and slurred, his movements uncertain. There was no food in front of him this time, and he simply laid his face on the dining table, shut his eyes, and snored.

Aaron got up, moving away from his chair, not bothering to push it under the table in case it made a sound. He started when he saw Jim standing before him.

"You made me jump!" Aaron said.

"Sorry," Jim said, not sounding sorry in the slightest. "Can you give me a hand with the captain?"

Jim had never asked for assistance before. It would delay Aaron's return to their quarters, where his family was waiting for him.

Aaron for one wasn't all that thrilled about leaving. Despite their surly nature and countenance, the crew were not bad people. They'd just been dealt a series of bad hands in life. They never complained about them, save in their darkest moments at the bottom of a bottle. There was no coming back once you had passed a certain point.

Many of the men aboard had been kidnapped, fed booze until they could hardly walk, and then carried to the Celeste. When they awoke, they were miles at sea, forced to serve their term until they landed at their home port again, and that often took years. In the interim, the men grew accustomed to their forced imprisonment, their families becoming nothing but cloudy memories.

And when they did return to their home ports, they didn't even seek out their families, for fear they had also forgotten about them in turn, perhaps moving on with a new man in the home, new children in front of the hearth. The world turned and the Mary Celeste sailed.

There was little that could be done about it now. The world had forgotten them, and they had in turn forgotten the world.

"What was Stoneheart talking about, with obsession earlier?" Aaron said in a whisper.

"The treasure," Jim said. "Tales of Stoneheart's obsession with finding it are as old as Stoneheart himself. He searched the pirate half of the world, searching every inch with his own eyes, but he never found it. He's convinced it must be on the British side, but despite everything he's tried, he can't get his hands on a copy of the British map. Maybe the treasure doesn't even exist at all."

Aaron put his head under one of the captain's arms and immediately regretted it, the body odour strong and overpowering. He held his breath and braced the captain's weight as Jim lifted the captain's other arm. Together they carried him over to the bed.

They left him with his legs hanging over the side. Jim removed his shoes and picked up a thin blanket, draping it over Stoneheart.

"He sure is a heavy sleeper," Aaron said. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone sleep this deep before. Except maybe my aunt. But then, she was in a coma at the time."

"He never used to sleep like this," Jim said. "He would wake upon hearing a pin drop, a pistol you didn't even know he had in his hand, aimed at you before you could blink."

Jim slapped the captain across the face. Aaron flinched, fearful he would have to tell the captain bedtime stories again.

"Now it takes him longer and longer to wake up," Jim said. "I think one of these days he won't wake up at all. He seems to prefer his dreams to the

real world. The men think he just gets himself blind drunk every night, but in truth he hardly touches the stuff."

"Does he have a sleep disorder?" Aaron said.

"I don't know," Jim said. "It could be something else, something more serious. The crew can't know about it. If they did, they would descend on him like a pack of wolves."

"It's dog eat dog here," Aaron said.

Jim frowned.

"There are no dogs aboard," he said.

"I know," Aaron said. "It means… Never mind."

"You speak funny," Jim said.

"I hear that often," Aaron said.

"Maybe if I spoke like you the captain would like my stories too," Jim said. "That's why I don't want you to go. I don't have your gift of storytelling. I can't send the captain off to sleep."

"We're not going anywhere," Aaron said.

Jim gave Aaron a flat stare.

"Of course you are," he said. "You'll at least make the attempt. You might even succeed. It was to be expected. You're not idiots."

"Maybe my gift isn't so good if it sends someone off to sleep like this," Aaron said. "That's usually the sign of a boring story."

"They entertain the captain," Jim said with a shrug. "That's all that matters."

He sighed. It took a toll on his constitution.

"I can't stop you from going," he said. "God knows I would if I had a family to run away with."

"Then come with us," Aaron said.

"Go with you?" Jim said.

"Why not?" Aaron said. "You're young, smart. You could join me in my class at school. I'm sure you'll get used to the surface faster than any of the adults could."

"Then who would look after the captain?" Jim said.

"What is he to you?" Aaron said. "He's not just a captain, is he?"

"He's everything I've ever known," Jim said. "My captain, my family. I cannot go with you. No matter how much I might want to. My place is here. This is where I belong."

An awkward moment passed between them. Aaron threw embarrassment to the wind and wrapped his arms around the older boy. Jim didn't know how to respond. He'd probably never encountered this kind of warmth before. He couldn't respond in any case, his arms were trapped to his sides by Aaron's embrace. Aaron finally straightened up and looked Jim in the eye.

"Thank you," he said.

"For what?" Jim said.

"For saving us," Aaron said. "For being a friend. For being kind. For everything."

It seemed a natural end in the conversation. He pushed the cabin door open and left.

Jim, carved from wood, for so long unable to feel a thing, touched his arms where he could still feel the pressure of Aaron's embrace, and smiled.

He caught himself in the antique oval mirror on the wall. He wiped the smile off his face and stood up, back straight. It would do him no good for someone to see weakness in him. He had to be hard and unflinching, like varnished wood. But in his quiet moments he would think of Aaron, his only real friend, and weep.

# 13

AARON FOUND his family right where they said they would be—in the room Jim had located for them.

“Is the rest of the ship asleep?” Bryan said.

“Yes,” Aaron said. “As far as I can tell.”

“Good,” Bryan said. “Let’s go.”

They had precious little to take with them—a few apples remained from the package Jim had given them, and a few small glass containers of clean water.

Cassie shut the cabin door behind them and then followed the family up the steps to the deck. Bryan was at the front, peering this way and that. It was silent. There wasn’t a mouse to make a noise. They turned the corner and placed their items in the ship’s boat.

Then Bryan and Zoe grabbed a rope each and began to pull on them, raising the boat off the deck. It swung side to side, striking the ship and making an empty hollow thud. They looked up at the crow’s nest, but there was no sign of anyone up there. Emanuel would be under rum’s hypnotic spell by now. Not even the dead could wake him.

Bryan was more right than he realized.

# 14

EMANUEL, the consummate drunk, was indeed unconscious. He lay in a pool of his own blood, it having spewed from the gash on the top of his head. He was below deck, beside an empty hollow in a wall on the starboard side.

The space was large enough to conceal half a dozen bottles, with straw jammed to hold them in place should the ship veer to one side. Otherwise the bottles would clink against the hull and alert anyone within hearing distance of their existence.

But the bottles were no longer there.

Smithy had taken it upon himself to follow Emanuel to his secret stash, a strategy that always ended in failure, and would have this time too if it wasn’t for Smithy’s enthusiastic sprinkling of Deadly Nightshade over Emanuel's evening meal, slowing him and his senses.

It was this disadvantage that had made following Emanuel a breeze. Usually he had the ability to lose his followers. He couldn’t walk in a straight line most days, and yet performed the most breathtaking gymnastics to evade his pursuers.

Even today, poisoned as he was, he took a couple of wrong turns and Smithy almost lost his trail. But Smithy caught the flap of Emanuel’s oversized jacket around a corner and continued, hot on his heels once more.

Eventually Emanuel came to his hidden stash. Smithy moved into position armed with a solid length of wood to smack Emanuel across the head, laying him out cold.

But Smithy wasn’t going to enjoy his quarry by himself if he didn’t hurry. Emanuel was meant to be on lookout duty. Smithy was quick to climb the rigging to the crow’s nest. He carted the bottles up with him.

Finally, out of breath and beyond exhausted, Smithy could take advantage of his isolated location. Nothing would happen this close to the coast, and Smithy needn’t worry about drinking himself blind.

He chuckled to himself as he took a swig from a bottle. He’d finished half a bottle before he realized what he’d done. He decided to pace

himself. The last thing he wanted was to poison his success, to be caught unconscious alongside a contingent of stolen bottles.

It would then be obvious who the perpetrator of Emanuel's death was, but that didn't pose a big problem. He would simply share his cache with whomever discovered him. That person must then also suffer an accident. But it was not ideal. It would quickly become too complicated, and if there was one thing Smithy did not like, it was complications.

And so it came as somewhat of a surprise when he heard a soft thudding sound from the bow of the ship. At first he took it for the water knocking against the hull, but there was a certain quality to it, higher pitched like it was coming from a smaller boat.

He got unsteadily to his feet, needing to grip the edge of the crow's nest with both hands and crouch slightly to prevent himself from pitching forward over the side.

His stomach protested, feeling like it was turning sideways. He was certain he would hurl at any moment. He got himself under control, and when he was able to open his eyes again he saw two images. He focused, and the two images became one. He couldn't believe what he was looking at.

The family, the one he himself had helped rescue, and thereafter hadn't been allowed to enjoy, was hastily lowering the ship's boat over the side and into the sea. They seemed to be in a hurry to get away. It was clear to him even in his inebriated state what their intention was. It was written clearly over their faces, in their actions.

Smithy reached for the bell. He missed by three inches. But he couldn't help grinning. Today was his lucky day.

# 15

THE SHIP'S BOAT touched down on the water's surface with a single soft slap. They were going to get away. There was no one who could stop them now.

"Zoe, Cassie," Bryan said. "You climb down first."

No argument. They gripped the ropes and began to scale. They used the soles of their feet to stop and rest every few yards. It was hard work, but soon they were in the ship's boat.

Bryan felt no need for him and Aaron to rush, though he couldn't deny his excitement to get away from the Mary Celeste as fast as he was physically capable. Their simple plan had worked out, with no serious hitches.

And then the bell rang. High in the crow's nest.

The blood fell from Bryan's face. No. It wasn't possible. Emanuel was meant to be unconscious, barely able even to breathe. But there was no denying the figure cast in shadow in the crow's nest. And he was vertical.

"Escape!" the figure shouted, pointing in Bryan's direction. "Escape!"

Bryan bristled at the speaker's voice. *No*, he thought. *Anyone but him.* Soon he would hear the thud of heavy boots and hard muscles on the stairs, tearing up the deck.

"Quick!" Bryan shouted at Aaron.

He picked Aaron up bodily and leaned him over the side, saving him a few precious seconds in his climb down the rope. Aaron's arms were still weak and scrawny, despite all the work he had done recently. It would take him some time to descend to the ship's boat.

"Get up you lazy bilge rats!" Smithy shouted as he descended from the crow's nest. "They're getting away! Get up you scum suckers!"

Bryan vaulted over the side and grabbed the rope, letting gravity pull him down as far as he dared before tightening his grip around the coarse fibers. He passed the rope through his hands in record time to the ship's boat.

"Get us loose!" Bryan said to Zoe. "Quick!"

He grabbed the rope and began pulling it loose from the pulley system. Zoe was working at hers too, but she was having some difficulty.

“I can’t!” Zoe said. “It’s stuck!”

*Click!*

*Clack!*

*Click!*

*Clack! Clack!*

The family looked up into the beady eyes of a dozen small black holes pointed at them. Pistol and rifle barrels. Bryan held up his hands. The rest of the family followed suit.

“Well, well, well,” Stoneheart said. “Look what we have here. Someone go check if we’re sinking. The rats are fleeing us.”

The men chuckled.

“Who’s responsible for raising the alarm?” Stoneheart said. “Who was on lookout duty?”

“I was, sir,” Smithy said, pushing his way to the front. “I noticed the crow’s nest was empty and thought it best to have eyes in it. Lucky I did.”

“Well done, Smithy,” Stoneheart said, slapping him on the back. “Jim, double rum rations for the esteemed Smithy. Behold, sailor. You have prevented a tragedy. Haul the family back up here. Their place is with us.”

“Please, let us go,” Bryan said. “We’re of no use to you. There’s nothing we can say or do that will endanger you.”

“So everyone looks until they become dangerous,” Stoneheart said.

“We don’t know anyone here,” Bryan said. “There’s nothing we can tell them, nothing we know.”

“You know the location of my ship, how many men are on board, who each of my men are,” Stoneheart said. “That’s a great deal more than anyone else knows.”

He pointed a pistol at Bryan’s head.

“Now, if you please,” he said.

Bryan sighed and slid the rope through the pulley. The men on either side of the captain pulled on the ropes. The ship’s boat gradually began to rise with juddering movements.

“I’m sorry,” Bryan said softly. “I failed us.”

“You didn’t fail,” Zoe said. “We were just unlucky, that’s all.”

The ship’s boat rose until the family members were eye to eye with the crew.

“Haven’t I been kind to you, Bryan?” Stoneheart said. “To your family? I gave you protection. I gave you food. I gave you water. I gave you purpose. And this is how you repay me?”

“We don’t belong here,” Bryan said. “We didn’t mean to offend you.”

“If you wanted to go, why didn’t you just ask?” Stoneheart said. “Don’t you like me?”

The ridiculousness of the situation almost made Bryan smile, but he daren’t laugh in a pirate’s face. He would beg and grovel if it meant keeping his family safe.

“No,” Bryan said. “Of course not. You’re a friend to me, to all of us. You’re right. I should have come and spoken with you first.”

“No you shouldn’t,” Stoneheart said. “I would have denied your request. And then I would have installed additional measures to ensure you didn’t attempt further foolishness. Now I’m going to have to take one of my gifts away from you. Do I take food, water, or protection?

“Clearly I can’t take away the first two. Without them you would starve and die, and then who would carry out your duties? So I have no choice but to take away my protection. From now on, the men will treat your ladies however they see fit.”

More than one man licked his lips at this proposition, and Bryan knew there was no way he was going to be able to fight them all off, but God knew he would do his utmost.

“Now, come back onto the Celeste peacefully and we’ll put this whole ugly business behind us,” Stoneheart said.

Bryan turned to look over the ship’s boat’s side at the sea below. It writhed and wrestled with the ship’s hull. He doubted they would get away, but their fate couldn’t be much worse than what awaited them aboard the Mary Celeste. He held Zoe’s hand and gave it a squeeze. She squeezed back. They were going to jump, all of them. It was likely to be the last thing any of them would do.

“Captain,” Jim said. “Don’t you recall the special mission you gave specifically to the family?”

The crew turned to face Jim. So did Stoneheart.

“Last night, before turning in for the night, you told them you wanted them to go onto the land, into British territory, to find a copy of the British map and bring it to you,” Jim said. “All in the pursuit of locating the hidden treasure. You’ve sent pirates in the past, but they were always

quickly identified by the British. By sending a family who could pass for British, you will overcome this problem."

Stoneheart's eyes narrowed. To admit he didn't recall any such order was to admit he had a problem with his memory. To call Jim a liar was almost as bad. The boy held a special place within the crew, and it could tear the men in two, forming two factions.

But it went deeper than that. To lose Jim, his only confidant and carer, was a direct threat to his own existence. Stoneheart's indecision was palpable. If Jim was killed, who was going to take care of him when he had his funny turns?

Aaron shook his head. He knew what Jim was doing. He was putting himself in the firing line, directly between the captain and family. What Jim would do if push came to shove, Aaron didn't know, but perhaps the threat alone was enough to discourage him.

The captain turned his head to one side and pursed his lips.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, of course. It's the smart thing to do, naturally. It's what needs to be done. They're disposable. If they fail, there's no great loss. Many of the British would recognize my crew on sight, having been surrounded by their wanted posters their whole lives. The family can go places we can't. Yes. Very clever of me. Quite ingenious. Very well."

Smithy gritted his teeth, face glowing bright red like he might blow. Stoneheart turned back to the family.

"You shall find the second half of the map and bring it to me," he said.

Bryan let himself smile—on the inside. He couldn't believe they were going to get away. They were never going to come back here, ever. Not without an armada at their back. Bryan nodded in response to the captain's command.

"We will," he said.

"Excellent," Stoneheart said, scratching his chin with his pistol, in deep thought. "But how am I supposed to trust you? I hardly know you. I'm meant to just watch you row off into the sunset and hope you'll bring back what you find? No, no, no. That doesn't sound much like the captain of the Mary Celeste to me."

Stoneheart already knew what his plan was, of course, but there was no fun in telling someone outright. He needed to make the most of it, to draw out the tension and make the family as fearful as possible. It was like watching him with the prisoners of the fishing trawler, knowing the

terrible outcome—the only possible outcome—but unable to do a thing about it, except perhaps to make the situation worse. Bryan waited with his heart in his throat.

“I could threaten you with death if you failed to return with the object of my desire,” Stoneheart said, “but as Jim has already clearly pointed out, there is no guarantee you will return even if you did find the map. Why, you might even take it to my enemies.”

“No,” Zoe said. “We would never-”

Stoneheart waved his hand, cutting her argument short. He didn’t want to hear anyone’s voice but his own. He pointed a finger at her and glared with squinting eyes.

“But of course,” Stoneheart said with a lazy toss of his arm. “It’s actually very simple. If I can’t threaten you, I’ll simply have to do it with one of your loved ones. I’m sure that’s the way I originally planned it.”

He turned to look at Jim.

“That sounds like me, in any case,” he said. “That is, unless I forgot my original plan?”

It was a challenge. To Jim. None of the other crewmembers appeared to pick up on it, or perhaps they just didn’t want to. But the family felt it, heard it in Stoneheart’s voice, in his tone. There was no wriggle room.

Jim shook his head.

“No, sir,” he said. “I believe that was your original plan.”

“Excellent,” Stoneheart said. “But I’m not cruel. I shall allow you to decide who will be the one to stay behind.”

Bryan opened his mouth, but Aaron spoke first.

“I’ll stay,” he said.

“Aaron…” Zoe said.

“I’ll be all right,” Aaron said. “It has to be me.”

And though Zoe knew he was right, that didn’t change how she felt at leaving him behind. She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tight. She locked eyes on Stoneheart.

“Please, don’t take my boy,” she said.

“He’s your final choice?” Stoneheart said, eyes flashing.

“We’ll come back,” Zoe said to Aaron. “You keep yourself safe, do you hear me?”

Aaron nodded. The scene brought a tear to a couple of the pirates’ eyes, focused intently on the mother and her son. Perhaps they recalled their

own kids, or a similar scene in their own pasts. But it made Bryan feel a little more confident about their precarious situation.

If they could empathize with Aaron, they would be less likely to want to treat him badly. In fact, they were more likely to protect him and take him under their wing.

“If you’ll just hand the boy over, we’ll let you get on with your mission,” Stoneheart said.

Aaron gripped the boat’s edge. Jim helped pull him up. Zoe locked eyes on Jim, who nodded back at her. He would keep him safe.

“You have two days,” Stoneheart said. “You will meet us at Hollow Cove at 4.00pm on the second day. That’s if you want to see your boy again. I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t.”

“Wait,” Zoe said. “We need more time.”

Stoneheart wasn’t interested in what the family had to say. He slapped the two men holding the ropes. They released their grip and let the pulleys work their magic. They unfurled, letting the ship’s boat strike the sea’s surface below, knocking the family members off their feet.

The family regained their composure. Bryan picked up the oars and began to row. The family had made it away from the Mary Celeste, but it had come at great cost. They would have to return, and if they weren’t successful, Aaron would pay the price.

# 16

BRYAN HALF EXPECTED to eat a bullet as he rowed toward shore, thinking each stroke might be his last. Stoneheart was impulsive, and even the slightest of breezes might alter his mind.

Zoe wouldn't take her eyes from the Mary Celeste, even when they had made land, gripping the ship's boat with both hands. They didn't bother to pull the ship's boat onto shore. Let the pirates fetch it from wherever the current took it.

"This is great," Zoe said. "We're on the land, minus Aaron. And we have to go find a map that might not even exist, for a treasure no one knows the location to, and to top it all off, we're in the middle of nowhere with no idea of where we need to go, and no way of getting there even if we did."

"You're right," Bryan said. "About everything. Save one thing."

"What?" Zoe said.

"We know where we have to go," Bryan said. "We have to go to New London."

"Great," Zoe said, folding her arms. "We're halfway to achieving our goal already."

"Why do we have to go there?" Cassie said. "The map could be anywhere."

"Stoneheart keeps his map in his cabin at all times," Bryan said. "Why would the British king be any different?"

The sun was already beginning to rise over the thick forest canopy, casting long finger-like shadows across the meadow. Birds sang their early morning chorus and the forest settled in for the long day ahead. Underneath it all was a noise, altogether different to the sounds of nature.

"Do you hear that?" Bryan said.

Cassie and Zoe listened.

"Hear what?" Zoe said.

"Sh," Bryan said.

And now they listened again, they did hear it. But still they couldn't identify it.

“What is that?” Cassie said.

“Bells,” Bryan said. “It’s the sound of ringing bells.”

Zoe and Cassie’s eyes glinted. That could only mean one thing.

“There’s a town nearby,” Cassie said.

“Yes,” Bryan said. “It might not be the one we want, but it’s a start.”

They skirted the forest, not wanting to take the difficult journey through its underbrush. They rounded a finger of land that jutted out to sea. As they came around it, the town on the other side came into view.

First came the quays, long and flowing, heading out to sea before giving up just a few dozen yards from where they started. Most of the ships were trawlers, copies of the kind they had come across just a few days ago.

“Let me do the talking,” Bryan said as they approached a boy taking crabs out of traps and setting them in a larger container.

“Excuse me,” Bryan said. “Do you know how I might get to New London?”

“You from the East Islands?” the crab boy said.

“Why do you say that?” Bryan said.

“By the way you talk,” the crab boy said. “You sound funny.”

*Well, you sound like someone from a bad Walt Disney movie*, Bryan thought. But he didn’t say it.

“How would we go about getting there?” Bryan said.

“The East Islands?” the crab boy said.

“No, New London,” Bryan said.

“Ferry,” the crab boy said. “Runs every half hour. From quay five most days.”

“Thank you,” Bryan said.

The fisherman at quay five looked the three family members over, staring openly at their clothes. He clearly didn’t approve. Cassie pursed her lips. A man wearing overalls splattered with fish guts shouldn’t be so opinionated about fashion.

“Excuse me,” Bryan said. “We’re looking for the ferry.”

“Out of towners?” the fisherman said.

“Is it that obvious?” Bryan said.

“East Islanders, I’d say,” the fisherman said.

“We need to take the ferry to New London,” Bryan said.

“I can do that,” the fisherman said, turning his head to spit.

“I thought you were a fisherman?” Zoe said.

“We do what we must to make ends meet,” the fisherman said.

“Great,” Bryan said. “We’ll take three tickets.”

“Three shillings,” the fisherman said.

“Shillings?” Bryan said, digging in his pocket. “I have US dollars. You can have everything I have.”

The fisherman took the money and turned it over in his hands. He fixed Bryan with a pinched expression.

“Is this some sort of joke?” he said.

“Not so far as I know,” Bryan said.

The fisherman handed the money back.

“No fare, no crossing,” he said.

“How about my watch?” Bryan said. “It’s made from gold.”

The fisherman looked at it, then shook his head.

“Nah,” he said.

“It’s twenty-one carat,” Bryan said.

“It ain’t no carrot,” the fisherman said.

“How about my necklace?” Zoe said.

“Fake pearls,” the fisherman said. “You can see they are. They ain’t got no lines.”

“That’s because they’re perfect,” Zoe said. “They’re not fake.”

The fisherman shook his head. He wasn’t having any of it.

“Take your merchandise elsewhere,” the fisherman said.

Another family approached, wearing traditional early twentieth century style dress: long dresses for the ladies, smart black suits for the men. The father of the British family proffered his tickets. The fisherman took them without checking and bowed.

“Thank you,” the fisherman said. “In you go, if you please. We’ll be departing in just a moment.”

Bryan and the others moved aside, heading back down the quay.

“What are we going to do?” Zoe said. “We have to get to New London. We don’t have time to walk there.”

“We’ll jump on board while the ferry is pulling away,” Bryan said.

“Oh you will, will you?” a voice behind them said.

They turned to find the crab boy carrying empty crab cages. He pushed through them, gripped the ladder, and climbed onto the ferry’s deck.

“You work with the fisherman?” Bryan said.

“I do,” the crab boy said with a nod.

“I have a gold watch-” Bryan said.

“I heard what you have,” the crab boy said. “I suppose it’s no surprise you have so little. I’d have as little if I was homeless too.”

“Homeless?” Bryan said. “What makes you say that?”

The crab boy looked the family up and down, shaking his head at the state of their dress.

“These jeans are Calvin Klein!” Cassie said.

“So you admit stealing them,” the crab boy said. “Take them back to Calvin whoever before you get in more trouble.”

Zoe took a step forward.

“We’d really appreciate it if you could help us,” she said. “We’re not bad people. We’re just in a bit of a hurry. We need to get to New London as soon as we can.”

The crab boy pursed his lips.

“I was homeless once,” the crab boy said. “I know what it’s like to think I have nothing to offer. But you should know you always have something of value to offer someone.”

“What do you want?” Bryan said.

“A kiss,” the crab boy said. “And a cuddle.”

“No!” Cassie said, turning pale. “No way! You can’t make me!”

“It’s just a kiss and cuddle,” Zoe said. “It’s a pretty cheap cost of passage.”

“No!” Cassie said, folding her arms. “I won’t do it. I refuse.”

The crab boy rolled his eyes.

“I don’t want them from you,” he said. “I want them from her.”

He pointed to Zoe.

No one was more shocked than Zoe at hearing this.

“Me?” Zoe said. “Why?”

“All aboard!” the fisherman bellowed at the opposite end of the quay.

“Are you going to kiss and cuddle me or not?” the crab boy said. “Time’s growing short.”

“Well?” Bryan said to Zoe. “Prepared to take one for the team?”

“Aaron did,” Zoe said. “I suppose there’s no way I can say no now, is there?”

Zoe and the others climbed the ladder onto the ship’s stern. Zoe wagged a finger under the crab boy’s nose.

“No tongues,” she said.

“Tongues?” the crab boy said, cocking his head to one side.
“Never mind,” Zoe said, not wanting to arouse the boy’s curiosity.
“Follow me,” the crab boy said. “If the captain sees you, I’ll be for it.”

# 17

THE BOAT left the quay and turned away from the dock. The crab boy left the family soon after leading them to a small room piled with passenger luggage. Wherever they had boarded the ship, it appeared to be a weekend trip resort for the rich.

Cassie was quick to start opening bags and root through them. She picked out dresses, jackets, shoes, pants and shirts.

“What are you doing?” Bryan said.

“We’re meant to infiltrate the British, right?” Cassie said. “So it’ll help if we look a bit more like them, don’t you think?”

Bryan couldn’t fault her logic, but he still didn’t like the idea of going through other people’s belongings.

“All right,” Bryan said. “But try to get everything from just a couple of suitcases.”

He intended on leaving his watch in one suitcase, and Zoe’s pearl necklace in another.

Zoe stood to one side, arms folded. She looked nervous.

“Are you all right?” Bryan said.

“Yeah,” Zoe said. “I just feel a bit weird about having to be intimate with someone I hardly know. Plus, he’s so young.”

“Shut your eyes and think of me,” Bryan said.

“And that’s meant to make it better?” Zoe said.

Bryan smiled and took her in his arms.

“We’ll soon be in New London, and we can plan our next step,” he said. “We’re doing this for Aaron. Whatever we have to do over the next couple of days, it’s all for him.”

Zoe nodded.

“You’re right,” she said. “We have to get him back. No matter what it takes.”

“The crab boy left after we set sail,” Bryan said. “With any luck he’ll be too busy and might not even turn up before we arrive.”

“Sorry to disappoint you,” the crab boy said, coming into the room. “I see you found the luggage.”

“I was just seeing what people packed,” Cassie said.

“It doesn’t matter to me what you do with it,” the crab boy said with a shrug. “They were stupid enough to leave it with us in the first place.”

“Terrific service,” Bryan said, rolling his eyes.

The crab boy approached Zoe, holding out his arms. He took a few steps toward her. Zoe shook her head, pulling away.

“I’m sorry, I can’t do this,” she said. “It’s too soon.”

“Then I suppose you’ve got a long swim,” the crab boy said, moving back toward the door.

“Wait,” Zoe said, letting out a sigh. “How about a peck on the cheek, no hug?”

The crab boy pressed his lips together.

“No deal,” he said, pushing the door open.

“Wait, wait,” Zoe said. “Yes. I’ll do it. All right.”

The crab boy turned around, but did not leave the door.

“No tricks,” he said.

“No tricks,” Zoe said.

The crab boy joined Zoe in the middle of the room again. Zoe wrapped her arms around him, kissed him on the cheek, and stepped back.

“There,” she said. “Done.”

“Is that how you hug your kids?” the crab boy said.

“My kids don’t smell like crab,” Zoe said.

The crab boy sighed, and then took his overalls off. He let them form a pile on the floor.

“Better?” he said.

“Marginally,” Zoe said.

“Forget it then,” the crab boy said, reaching for his overalls.

He seemed hurt, angry. He was their one chance of getting to New London. Zoe shouldn’t squander it.

“Tell me a bit about yourself first,” Zoe said.

“What do you want to know?”

“You’re stalling,” the crab boy said.

“No, I’m not,” Zoe said. “What’s your name?”

“Rory,” the crab boy said.

“Okay Rory,” Zoe said. “How old are you?”

“Fourteen,” Rory said.

“Where did you grow up?” Zoe said.

“New Birmingham,” Rory said.

“What do your parents do?” Zoe said.

Rory shrugged.

“I wouldn’t know,” he said. “I’ve never met them.”

“You never met your mother?” Zoe said.

“That’s what I said, didn’t I?” Rory said. “You know what? This is a bad idea. Enjoy your journey.”

He turned, his face curled with anger, and headed for the door.

“No, wait,” Zoe said. “Come here.”

Rory turned his angry glare on her.

“I’m sorry,” Zoe said. “I recently lost my son and… and you remind me of him a little.”

“What was his name?” Rory said.

“Aaron,” Zoe said. “He was a little younger than you, but I still miss him.”

Rory’s anger melted. He wasn’t a bad kid. He was just a little rough around the edges and didn’t know how to control his emotions.

“I want you to hug me like I was him,” he said, his voice soft, barely audible. “I know I’m not him. But I want to feel like I could be. That probably sounds stupid.”

“No,” Zoe said. “Not at all.”

Zoe moved toward Rory, who now looked nervous. Zoe wrapped her arms around him. It was still awkward and uncomfortable, but they were embracing.

Rory tightened his grip. Zoe reciprocated. Then she closed her eyes.

And then something happened.

Zoe’s expression turned calm, the lines around her eyes disappearing. She put her head to the boy’s greasy hair, and it became clear to Bryan she was thinking about Aaron. Rory was about Aaron’s height, and with her eyes closed, it was easy to fool yourself. Slow tears spilled out the corners of her eyes.

They rocked as they moved in a circle. It was a deeply personal moment. Bryan looked away. Rory just wanted a little affection in a world that didn’t care.

Rory pulled back and wiped at his own eyes. He looked tired, but happy at the same time.

“You can come with us, if you want,” Zoe said, wiping her wet cheeks dry.

“Travel with a bunch of East Islanders?” Rory said, slipping his overalls back on. “No thanks. I’ve got a reputation to uphold.”

He left.

# 18

ZOE LEANED on the railing, watching the trail the ferry made as they scythed through the water. Nature's watery footprint. She wore a plain white traditional dress with flower patterns on it. Bryan, wearing a smart brown suit just a little long in the arms, joined her.

"How are you holding up?" Bryan said.

Zoe shrugged. Bryan placed his hands on her shoulders and applied pressure. She could prevent being turned around if she wanted, but she didn't fight him. She burst into tears as Bryan took her in his arms and held her tight.

"We'll get him back," Bryan said. "I promise."

Zoe nodded, but the action was weak, matching her conviction.

"And you remember what he was like on the ship," Bryan said. "Who would have thought he would be so at home on a boat? He must take after his father for his adventurous spirit."

"George was good on boats," Zoe said. "He must have inherited his genes."

"Fortunately," Bryan said with a smile. "Fortunate for him, and for us."

"I wish George were here," Zoe said. "He'd know what to do. He'd have felt at home here."

The statement was a powerful blow to Bryan. He felt physically winded. He wanted to pull away, to show Zoe how much it hurt him to hear her say something like that, that he felt less of a man for it. But he didn't. He couldn't afford to be selfish, not now. Not when they had so much on their plates and so much they needed to do.

"We'll get him back," Bryan repeated.

The ferry began to slow as they approached the quay. They came to a stop. The gangplanks fell a moment later and the passengers began to disembark.

The city of New London took the family's breath away. It was shiny and white, like a pearl clinging to the mountain's lower flank. A majority of the buildings had been carved into it. It was a perfect natural defensive position. The palace itself was a large protrusion halfway up the mountain,

supported by thick columns of marble that stuck out at a forty-five degree angle, bolstered by the ramshackle houses that had been built below it. No building was built higher up the incline than the palace, and Bryan suspected no building ever would be.

It was quite a sight, one none of them would forget in a hurry. It was unlike anything Bryan had ever seen before, save in a big budget Hollywood movie. Hidden here, somewhere amongst the catacombs, was a small scrap of paper with the map they were looking for.

Where on Earth would they begin?

# 19

THE KING was a tub of lard squeezed into the throne. His was a hunched figure with no neck, and a belly that took up the majority of his frame. He was essentially a stomach on legs. Some people spoke with their eyebrows, others the corner of their mouths. The king spoke with his flabby arms, waving them like he was communicating in a long forgotten language.

He wore short sleeves that exposed his wobbly appendages. On each arm he had a birthmark. One had the appearance of a hammer, the other a sickle. The king was always quick to show them off at any ceremonies held in his honor. It was a strange occurrence, showing up only in the male line of the family, as if they had always been destined to stand out from the great unwashed, given God's stamp of approval.

Filling his great entrance hall were the suckups and well wishers, the liars and scammers, those cajoling for position in the king's court. It made Admiral sick to his stomach that he shared kinship with these people. Not one wasn't a cousin of some description.

They were all petty and small minded, unable to see beyond their identical inbred noses. They were vultures masquerading as parakeets. They looked innocent and spoke kindly, but they were each of them embroiled in a spiderweb of their own design.

Ask them directly who they were loyal to within the court, and they wouldn't have a simple answer, save for the king. They would all decry eternal loyalty to him, and it was the one lie to which they were all guilty. Every plan they hatched was dedicated to the king's removal.

Admiral could hardly complain. It kept him busy. He was in charge of the kingdom's armada, a thousand ships that had stripped the kingdom of its great forests in order to build. It was his job to protect the coastline and keep the marauding pirates at bay.

Anything Admiral had to say about the lords and ladies of the court, he must also apply to himself. He was ambitious, like them, but not for the throne. His sights were set firmly on the eradication of the pirates. It was his sole purpose and what made him get up in the morning. Further, he had

the means and the will to make it happen. It was already happening, not that anyone else would ever know that.

In New British culture, a title was not merely an addendum, it was your identity. You *became* your title. Differentiation was achieved by inferring tone. A playful tone for a playful Doctor, a grouchy tone for a grumpy Doctor, and so on.

The real difficulty came to dentists, who were always referred to in a sadistic tone, and thus they were indistinguishable from one another. Thankfully, it was a law of nature that no one associated with more dentists than was absolutely necessary, and so each dentist was assumed to be from the same cloudy pool of disagreeable people.

Spittle dribbled from the king's protruding lips, and the lords and ladies continued to simper and nod. As reckless as they were in their plans, they were responsible for the maintenance of the kingdom, something they were surprisingly good at, if only for their selfish desire to remain at the top. It was thanks to them the kingdom was relatively happy.

The number of pillaging pirate attacks were down, and the farms would see a bumper harvest, so much so that the towns needed to build extra silos to store it all. The king gave his permission to fell the trees required, so long as an equal number were planted in their place. The blue bloods nodded, bowing so low Admiral thought they would stub their long noses on the floor.

Admiral cleared his throat.

"Is there any more business to discuss?" he said.

As the admiral of the king's fleet, he was also the Voice of the king, meaning he had to conduct such meetings.

One of the lords opened his mouth to speak.

"Then we bid you a good day and shall speak again at the next meeting," Admiral said.

The lord snapped his mouth shut and glared indignantly at Admiral, who pretended not to notice. The lords and ladies filed out of the great hall. The moment they were gone, Admiral let out a deep sigh.

"I don't know why you insist on having boring meetings with such dullards every single week of the year," Admiral said

"They manage the kingdom," King (pronounced with a hard, unflinching tone) said. "It might not be the most exciting job in the world, but someone must do it."

“But why do we have to listen to their petty concerns?” Admiral said.

“Because that is what ruling means,” King said. “Listening to the concerns of the people in order to make their lives easier.”

“There’s nothing easy about any of this,” Admiral grumbled.

A team of servants lifted a table from the corner of the room and removed it to the wide open space before the king. They left, followed by the armed soldiers. King and Admiral were left alone.

“You’ll be in attendance at the memorial ceremony today?” King said.

*As if I have a choice,* Admiral thought.

“Of course,” he said.

They were silent a moment, the king’s expression turning distant.

“Ten years,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief. “Where does the time go?”

*Not where it should be going,* Admiral thought.

Seven unimposing figures entered the room. There were five men and two women. No matter how many times Admiral studied their faces he could not remember what they looked like five minutes later. That was one reason why they had been chosen, of course. They were instantly forgettable.

They unfolded the documents they carried and moved around the table. They were well practised at this. They each added a single piece of a puzzle that, once finished, presented the map of the entire British kingdom.

On it were the half a dozen large British cities—New Birmingham, New Norwich, New Liverpool, New Manchester, New Edinburgh and, of course, the capital New London. Every quadrant had been drawn in each cartographer’s own particular style. It gave the map somewhat of a patchwork quality.

The cartographers kept their eyes on the floor at all times in an effort not to see the other pieces of the map. It was one of many precautions the crown took to keep the map secret. None but King and Admiral would have access to the whole map. If the pirates ever got hold of a copy, they would know precisely where and how to hit each of the coastal towns. The cartographers turned and left the room, taking their nervousness with them.

Admiral moved to a basket left on a small side table. Inside it were a series of small toy ships. There were black pirate and white British ships.

Admiral moved around the map, placing each piece in accordance with his reports. Each British ship actually represented ten ships in their fleet. Even without this accommodation, the British ships greatly outnumbered the pirates.

“It never ceases to amaze me how you manage to keep track of the location of every single ship in the fleet,” King said.

“We all have our little talents,” Admiral said.

“Mine appears to be for eating,” King said, slapping his stomach.

“Yours is for not knowing when to stop,” Admiral said.

King chuckled.

“Yes,” he said. “I suppose it is. But would I be here if it wasn’t?”

King had taken control of the kingdom from the inept and corrupt leader before him. King had been a soldier in the previous leader’s army, noted for his physical prowess and way around a sword. Hard to imagine that now.

But it had been him, not the numerous generals, lords and ladies who had taken a stand against the tyrant king, slitting his throat and taking his power for himself. The generals acted to stop the young king, but it was too late.

By then he had gathered enough support to defend against their attacks. He also had the love of the people to back him if he needed it. Weak though the people were, they all recognized the need for change.

King had married twice, harvesting one son with each. The first wife had died of pneumonia. King had loved her intensely, and it was five years before he even looked at another woman.

The first woman he saw became his second wife. Due to the passing of time between the two marriages, the children had an age gap of almost fifteen years.

Admiral supposed they could have still grown close to one another, but fate had intervened and tragedy struck, wrenching the boy prince from the royal family.

Admiral focused the king’s attention on the map.

“The coastline is well defended,” he said. “But there is only so much we can do against a determined foe. A dozen farmers were murdered, their crops stolen. The citizens are growing restless, wary. They want more resources to protect them. But in my opinion, we’re doing as much as

efficiency allows. Spending more on defences would have a negligible effect. The available resources could be better used elsewhere."

"Very well," King said.

Admiral let a pause open before them, forming a deep trench. Admiral wouldn't bring up the forbidden topic. It would be up to the king to do that. But King surprised Admiral by broaching a different subject.

"I've been getting reports of cargoes of raw materials going missing," King said. "Metal, wood, rubber. Have you heard about any of this?"

"Yes," Admiral said, hesitantly. He was on the back foot. "The pirates are intercepting our shipments enroute to their destination."

"I see," King said.

It was a quick way of ending conversation on any uncomfortable topics. Blame pirate activity, and thereby the king's inactivity, and King would quickly change topic.

"And the sudden combustion of ships?" King said.

The change in topic. For the past few weeks there had been unconfirmed reports of pirate ships spontaneously exploding, apparently without cause. It had happened to two or three pirate ships so far, each just a few days apart.

"I can assure you it was none of our ships," Admiral said. "They were all out of range when the incidents occurred."

"I read the reports," King said. "Any idea what the cause is?"

"No sir," Admiral said. "But storing gunpowder incorrectly has been known to spontaneously explode. That might be the cause."

"Pirates are experienced seamen," King said. "They will know the importance of such things, especially when their lives are on the line. Keep an eye on it and inform me of all such occurrences, will you?"

"Yes, sir," Admiral said.

More than once Admiral had a pirate ship on the ropes, had them in his sights. He could have destroyed them, but always recalled his king's orders, and stood down. It irritated both him, and his men.

These pirates took what they wanted from the good hardworking people of New Britain, often murdering them in the process, and yet the king's navy did nothing to stop them.

Once, Admiral met a pirate ship that had been spotted marauding along the New Britain coast. Admiral had been ordered by the king himself not to retaliate. A king's man, Admiral had followed orders.

Then Admiral came across the very same pirate ship a few days later. It was departing a family-owned fishing trawler. They were well within British waters and simply earning their daily bread. Admiral was devastated by what he witnessed.

The women had been molested, the children decapitated, their heads strung from ropes that the pirates hung from the keel. It was Halloween, and the pirates had decided to shove candles in their eye sockets, like human jack o' lanterns.

Admiral had felt such anger that he gave the order to attack the pirate ship and tear them to pieces, ignoring his king's orders. They did their duty that day, the men grateful to relieve some of the pent up agitation they'd had to endure over the past few years. It was one of the few times Admiral had felt proud of holding his current position.

The king had requested his presence the moment he'd made port. Admiral had sensed a change in the winds. Perhaps this was all the king needed: a reminder of what justice really looked like. However, the king's response to the event proved to be very different indeed.

"Tell me Admiral," King said. "What are the orders I gave you concerning contact with the pirate ships?"

The smile slid off Admiral's face.

"But Father-" he said.

His father, the king, had smacked him across the face, making the only direct contact Admiral could recall in his long life as the prince regent. It had been a single blow, and Admiral stumbled back, the corner of his mouth bleeding. His shock at the king's decision canceled out any pain.

"Well?" King said.

"To not attack them," Admiral said.

"Speak up, boy," King said.

"To not attack them," Admiral said. "Under any circumstances."

"And what did you do?" King said, his voice quivering with fury.

"Father-" Admiral said.

"Today, you are not my son," King said. "Today you are an untrustworthy whelp. Today I am ashamed of you."

King had stopped himself, turning away to regain his composure.

"I understand why you did it," King said. "What they did was unforgivable. But I am your king, as well as your father. And you above all others must follow my commands. Is that understood?"

“Yes, Father,” Admiral said.

King sighed.

“What was the name of the pirate vessel you blew from the water?” he said.

“The Kraken,” Admiral said.

King nodded. If Admiral hadn’t known better, he would have said he looked relieved.

“Then the situation may yet still be salvageable,” he said. “But you are never to attack another pirate ship. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Admiral said.

“I said, is that clear?” King said, voice like iron.

“Yes, sir!” Admiral said.

It was the first crack in Admiral’s sense of duty. It would be some time before he came up with the plan he needed to undermine his orders without giving himself away, but that was undeniably the beginning.

Admiral never discovered why his father had reacted the way he had. King never felt the need to explain, and Admiral wasn’t in a position to ask. He had always been curious, and despite all his personal investigations, he had not discovered a morsel related to the matter.

It was something apparently only the king was privy to. If Admiral was to learn the truth, it would have to come from his lips, and his alone.

The British navy had the necessary numbers and firepower, possessed the will to act, and even had the full support of the citizens, but still the king would not relent. He would not condone aggression against the pirates.

Admiral knew they could not stay their hands forever, and the promise of the defeat of the pirate infestation could sow the seeds of succession for the next usurper king. King would find himself in the same position he himself had fought to overthrow.

It was true many rich men in the kingdom had approached Admiral to divert his loyalty from his father, and with control of the seas under him, he would have been a powerful ally.

But he was cut from the same cloth as his father. It was a cold and inflexible material, not prone to breaking under pressure. Turning against the king was an alien and unwelcome concept.

Admiral never joined with them, never gave his allegiance to anyone but his father. But he never informed him of their approaches either. He

supposed King already knew. And even if he didn’t, it was all the same to the king.

Still, ‘the Pirate Policy’ as Admiral came to think of it, drove a wedge between him and his father. They never discussed the automatic cowering of British forces in face of pirate aggressors again, and Admiral was forced to bear the brunt of his sailors’ anger. As far as they were aware, it was his orders that prevented them from avenging their fallen brothers and sisters.

Admiral was angrier than they would ever know, but he had a lifetime of disguising his emotions to draw upon, and the anger seethed, cold and furious beneath the surface. The day for releasing it would come soon, but until that day it would remain a secret, this time privy only to himself.

If the king could have an exclusive secret, so could Admiral.

The pirates were getting more and more rambunctious, girded by British impotence. They were attacking more frequently than they ever used to before. The king’s impositions forced the kingdom’s armies to build defensive walls and organise regular patrols. It was not an efficient system, neither was it effective. They threw money at the problem, increasing taxes, something the citizens were not thrilled about.

A schism had developed, not only in the relationship between the king and his commander of the high seas, but within Admiral himself. He became convinced the only way for the British empire to flourish was for the pirates to be eradicated and wiped from the world. Only then could science guide their development.

If he could destroy the greatest scourges of them all, the legend all pirates looked up to, Admiral was convinced the rest would fall like dominoes.

Stoneheart. He was the primary target.

When you worried about your family’s safety, it diverted you from thoughts of the cosmos and the natural world. But that age of enlightenment was close at hand, and it was by the prince’s efforts that it would come to fruition.

Without the support of his king, and unwilling to ally with the scheming lords and ladies of the land, Admiral, the prince regent, had had to do a deal with the devil, and soon, payment would have to be made.

# 20

IT WAS the most uncomfortable part of the week for Cartographer (pronounced with a soft, almost whimpering sound), having to sit here and make conversation with the other cartographers. The one topic they all had in common, the one field they all had passion, was the one topic they couldn't bring themselves to talk about for fear they would accidentally reveal secret information.

Armed guards stood on either side of the door that led to the king's great hall. Cartographer eyed them warily, fully expecting them to be given the order to kill the occupants of this room one day. The order hadn't come yet. But it would. Cartographer was certain.

Cartographer ran his eyes over their exposed muscular arms in an effort to identify distinguishing marks. The guards' faces were hidden behind their conical helmets.

The hall doors were thick, and the cartographers wouldn't have been able to hear anything even if they'd pressed their ears to them. Cartographer would have plugged his fingers in his ears if he could hear the voices. It was more than his life was worth—more than his *son's* life was worth.

The guards stiffened. and the shaft of their halberds smacked the ground, making a harsh *clack!* noise. Cartographer jumped, his body shaking. He was not a brave man, he knew. He'd only ever had his bravery tested once, and he had failed, spectacularly.

He'd volunteered to be a cartographer, doing his bit in the war against the pirates. He was an artist, and thought he could do a good job at replicating a map of any given area. From the thousands who had applied, he had been chosen. He'd been equal parts excited and fearful, realizing he'd just signed up to join a war he'd previously had no real part in.

What they never warned him about was the price of admission. The king's guards turned up on his son's tenth birthday party, interrupting as he made his wish and blew out his candles. Cartographer had stood by as they took his son away. It wasn't until the following week, at Cartographer's first meeting, that the truth of the matter was revealed.

He had turned up at the meeting unshaven, wearing the same clothes for the past three days. The other cartographers wore the same shabby style. Admiral himself had entered their little room and explained their loved ones had been the lucky recipients of navy scholarships. They would be given privileged positions and opportunities other cadets could only dream of. They hadn't applied for them, of course, but Cartographers' important role within the war meant his son was entitled to such special treatment.

Much of that meeting was now a blur in Cartographer's mind, but one sentence had engraved itself on his brain:

"So long as you all continue to serve your king and country with the same fervor we've come to expect, your children will continue to receive special recognition and protection within the navy."

Special *protection*.

It was clear to all present what had really happened. Their pale complexions proved that much. Their loved ones had been taken hostage. Cartographer had thought he was making a small sacrifice to serve his king and country. Instead, it was his son who was making it for him.

Cartographer shook his head. He didn't want to think about it. It did no good to dwell on such things. He had promised himself he wouldn't. The cartographers had evidently made the same promise to themselves and talked about everything *except* that which they wanted to talk about. Their loved ones.

The hall doors opened and the cartographers stood up, bowing their heads in respect as Admiral passed. The cartographers entered the hall and kept their eyes firmly on the floor, avoiding all eye contact with the king as they collected their individual pieces of map.

Cartographer's jurisdiction was the eastern coast and neighboring islands. Not a particularly large or important area of the world, but it was more than enough danger for him.

He cursed the day he decided to be an artist, riling against his parents wishes for him to enter his family's merchant business. If he had done as they suggested he wouldn't have lost his son, wouldn't have struggled to sleep for the past seven years and…

No. He mustn't think about it. There was nothing he could do about it now in any case. He rolled his segment of the map up and tucked it under his arm. The cartographers were escorted out of the room by the guards, through the cavernous palace corridors, to the front gates of the palace.

Cartographer kept his eyes on the pavement, eyes flicking side to side. He doubled back and made wide detours in case someone had decided to follow him. It wasn't just his own life he had to be careful of, but his son's. Really, it was *only* his son's life he had to protect. He didn't care what happened to himself.

Unfortunately for Cartographer, he was about to get the very kind of attention he so desperately wanted to avoid.

# 21

“SO, HERE we are in New London,” Zoe said. “What do we do now?”

“We figure out a plan,” Bryan said.

“Nice to see you’ve worked out all the kinks,” Zoe said.

“We need to get a grip on what we’re doing here and what we’re going to do next,” Bryan said, forging ahead. “We don’t have a lot of time left.”

“Well, what are we going to do next?” Zoe said.

“We’re going to find the best cartographer in town,” Bryan said. “The king will insist on using only the best.”

“What’s a cartographer?” Cassie said.

“A cartographer is the guy who draws maps,” Bryan said. “It makes sense to talk to him first. If there’s anything worth knowing about maps, he’ll know about it.”

“But how are we supposed to find him?” Cassie said.

“By using a little thing called conversation,” Bryan said. “Something you young ‘uns don’t know anything about.”

He approached a girl selling flowers. She bawled her wares at the top of her lungs.

“Excuse me,” Bryan said in his awful broad British accent. “Perhaps you can help me.”

“Ain’t nothing a bouquet of fine fresh forget-me-nots never made better,” the flower girl said. “Only a penny each.”

“They’re very nice,” Bryan said. “Tell me, do you know where I might be able to find the local cartographer?”

“Cartographer?” the flower girl said. “What’s that?”

“It’s someone who draws maps,” Cassie said.

“And what would you be wanting to do with a map maker, my love?” the flower girl said.

“There’s a boundary dispute in our village,” Bryan said. “We need a map to decide which party has the right to the land.”

“The East Islands, I take it?” the flower girl said.

“That’s right,” Bryan said.

“Afraid I can’t help you,” the flower girl said. “But these daffodils might provide some relief.”

“They are beautiful,” Bryan said, making a show of bending down and sniffing them. “But if I was compelled to locate the cartographer, where might he be found?”

“Might as well look for a needle in a haystack,” the flower girl said. “No one knows where the cartographer lives.”

“Why’s that?” Bryan said.

“You East Islanders sure don’t know a lot about how things are done, do you?” the flower girl said.

“Blame our backward ways,” Bryan said.

“It’s for security reasons,” the flower girl said.

“Security?” Bryan said.

“On account of pirate attacks,” the flower girl said. “There’s a lot of attacks as it is, but imagine if they were to get their grubby hands on a map of the whole kingdom. We wouldn’t get a moment’s peace with them pillaging and stealing and the like. Perhaps that’s the reason for the land dispute? Lilies are perfect for funerals.”

“I don’t need any flowers,” Bryan said, patience running thin.

The girl’s expression turned sour.

“And I don’t need to have my time wasted, thank you very much,” the girl said, turning and shouting her sales spiel at the passing crowd.

“That went well,” Zoe said as they headed away.

“We got some information,” Bryan said. “Not what we were hoping for, but it’s better than nothing.”

“You should drop your fake British accent,” Zoe said.

“Why?” Bryan said. “I think I sound debonair.”

“You sound like Dick Van Dyke in Mary Poppins,” Zoe said.

“I take that as a compliment,” Bryan said.

“You shouldn’t,” Zoe said.

“We need to split up,” Bryan said. “Speak to as many people as we can. Someone must know where we can find the cartographer.”

“All right,” Zoe said. “But promise me you’ll drop the accent. Or you’ll be picked up by the cops for disturbing the peace.”

# 22

ADMIRAL HATED most memorials. They harked back to a moment of loss in the past and promoted the wrong kind of remembrance; to forgive our enemies, to love them, to take a softer line in future.

Nothing could be more suicidal.

Life was about looking forward, not back. To learn from prior mistakes was a must, of course, a necessary component of improving systems and strategies. It was not about disposing of those targets altogether, but refining them for a more efficient system.

The lords and ladies stood behind the king, providing a united front. They faced a large open space, looking at a single short plinth. On it was a metal plate displaying the face of the young prince. It was the one day in the entire year that King would get to his feet and use his own legs to carry his mammoth self across the short expanse and lay a wreath at the foot of the memorial.

King's lips moved, but Admiral never heard the words he spoke. He often wondered what they were.

The king had fawned over his youngest son in a way he never had with his eldest son, Admiral. But Admiral wasn't jealous. Far from it. He was grateful for the distance his father's war on the pirates granted him. His father was prone to violent outbursts, and they were aimed at whoever happened to be in the vicinity at the time. The young prince was often that method of release.

Admiral could see the effect it had on the malleable young mind. He felt sorry for the kid, and always made time to play with him, treating him like the little boy he was for once, without the crushing weight of duty on his shoulders. They were not close. Admiral was too busy to spend the required amount of time that that kind of relationship demanded.

Admiral regretted not spending more time with the young prince. Especially with what happened to him.

Prior to that fateful day, the British had been hitting the pirates hard, smashing their forces to smithereens. Admiral continued the work his own father had started. But their success came at a cost.

The British navy’s attacks had driven the pirates to desperation. They hit the coastal towns and villages in retaliation, often not even taking any of the produce, only intending to inflict as much damage as possible, taking the locals to recruit for their ships, forcing them to work the decks, so the British were actually fighting their own population.

The British continued to attack, continued to pound the pirates into submission, into near-oblivion. Only the very best pirates and navigators remained, and the British were hunting them down mercilessly. Stoneheart himself had evaded them a dozen times, but even his time was growing short.

Then the pirates did what no one expected. They took the battle to the capital.

A heavy pirate attack was mounted on the capital’s docks. Meanwhile, a small contingent of pirates broke into the palace and kidnapped the young heir. The guards scrambled to rescue the prince, but they instead sealed his doom. The escape was bungled, and the prince was killed in the firing line.

Losses had been severe on both sides. A three day ceasefire was announced, time during which Admiral armed all his ships to a level they had never been before. They were going to lay waste to the entire pirate brigade once and for all, and within a season. Everyone was behind the effort.

Everyone, save the king.

Admiral had stood before the king in the great hall, awaiting his orders. It was merely a formality, he’d thought. He knew what his job was, and he was more than willing to carry it out. It was personal.

“You are to cease and desist all attacks upon the pirates,” King said. “You are to defend our land without recourse to violence, even if you are not the primary instigator.”

“What?” Admiral said.

“You heard me,” King said.

To say Admiral was dumbfounded was an understatement.

“But we have them on the ropes!” Admiral said. “A couple more months, and they’ll be confined to the pages of history!”

King smacked his throne with his fleshy palm.

“I said there is to be no more bloodshed!” he said.

“There will be bloodshed,” Admiral said. “Ours!”

History proved him right. Pirate numbers grew exponentially, like a weed, in an effort to replenish what the British had taken. They seemed to know the British were impotent, and took full advantage, commandeering the British ships on the open sea, running them down, boarding them and slaughtering the crew.

The British altered their ships, building them for speed rather than firepower in an effort to outrun the pirates. They were playing a game of tag while wearing a blindfold. It was a disaster. Still, King would not budge.

And here they were, ten years later, the pirate problem worse than ever. Rather than mourn what had been lost, Admiral preferred to take action and do something about it. But Admiral faced a conundrum.

How was he meant to take action, defying his father's orders without actually appearing to? He could not be seen to undermine his father's authority, but he needed to eradicate the pirates, to blow them from the water. He devised many plans, but none satisfied him.

And then one day the answer provided itself.

It came in the form of a man in a cowled cape in the prince's own private quarters. How the stranger had managed to get past his guards, the prince did not know, but he was more than capable of defending himself.

The figure did not attack, and was not intimidated by the prince's brandished sword. He calmly described Admiral's situation with incredible clarity, and then proposed the solution.

It was so simple, would be so effective, that Admiral wondered why he hadn't considered it himself. And then he realized why. The technology to carry it out didn't exist yet.

Admiral was skeptical at first, taking the cowled figure as a madman, but then the man provided blueprints, designs for the contraption he had described.

It was an odd-looking device, consisting of a dome with a glass front. He hadn't seen anything like it before, and yet… and yet it looked strangely beautiful. Might it actually work?

"Give it to your chief engineer," the cowled figure said. "He will tell you it can be done."

Admiral couldn't take his eyes off the designs.

"What's to stop me taking your designs and building this device myself?" he said.

“Nothing,” the cowled figure said. “Except the materials to build it require processes you have not yet developed in your world.”

“In my world?” Admiral said.

And that was when his reeducation began, the most informative hour he had ever received. The cowled figure described a series of worlds, each linked to one another via Passages, each derived from a single world up on the surface, with a history as long as the deepest worlds below the surface.

It sounded too fantastic to believe, and for the second time, Admiral wondered if the cowled figure wasn’t really a mad man after all. Or perhaps he himself had lost his mind. Was it even possible for a madman to know he was crazy?

“Your only other option is to have your father murdered and accept the throne yourself,” the cowled man said. “But we both know that’s not something you’re capable of.”

“That’s treason,” Admiral said, his tone turning cold and raising his sword.

“I’m not a citizen of your world,” the cowled man said. “Your laws do not apply to me.”

“They do while you’re in it,” Admiral said.

He glared at the cowled man, who only waited. Admiral lowered his sword.

“What do you want in exchange?” he said.

“You will build me a fleet of these machines,” the cowled figure said. “Twenty-five, to be exact.”

“Twenty-five?” Admiral said. “What will you use them for?”

“I think we both know that need not concern you,” the cowled figure said.

“It does if you intend to use them against the crown,” Admiral said.

“We will not use them against you,” the cowled figure said.

Admiral was uncertain.

“If that was our intention, we would have had them built elsewhere and then used them against you,” the cowled figure said.

Admiral glared at the cowled figure. He didn’t know who he was or where he came from, but he didn’t like him. He supposed that didn’t matter in business. It was about doing what was best for the kingdom.

“I will discuss the contraption with my chief engineer,” Admiral said, turning to place the designs on his desk. “How do I contact you?”

“You don’t,” the cowled figure said. “We’ll contact you.”

“‘We’?” Admiral said.

He turned to find his room empty.

Admiral awoke the next morning in a cold sweat, entrapped in a sea of bed sheets. He’d peered about himself, eyes scrubbing the room for the cowled figure. Finding no sign of him, Admiral fell back in bed, relieved it had only been a dream.

But the image of the contraption remained in his mind, and for the next ten minutes, a lifetime for Admiral, who never usually laid in, he turned the device over in his mind, analysing it from every direction. Was it possible to build? He would need to consult his chief engineer.

He threw his legs over the side of his bed and immediately felt sick to his stomach.

Spread out before him like a carpet were the contraption blueprints.

# 23

BRYAN HAD asked a dozen people for the location of a cartographer, and every time, he had met blank stares. It was as if their brains switched off the moment he said the ‘c’ word. He was rejoined with Zoe and Cassie. They reported the same experience.

“They look like when your computer freezes,” Cassie said. “It’s like they’ve all been hypnotized and trained to respond the same when we say the magic word.”

“Wait,” Zoe said. “Maybe we’re going about this the wrong way.”

“How?” Bryan said.

“If these people do such an important job, making maps that if they fell into the hands of the enemy could prove disastrous, don’t you think they would be hidden away?” Zoe said. “What’s the best way of hiding someone without having to use valuable resources?”

“I don’t know,” Bryan said.

“Think,” Zoe said. “You’d hide them in plain view.”

“Huh?” Bryan said.

“That makes sense,” Cassie said. “Right under everyone’s nose without them knowing.”

“I fail to see how this helps us,” Bryan said.

“They’ll look normal and do common jobs,” Zoe said.

“Right,” Cassie said. “They won’t be body builders or fighters. They’ll be artistic. They’ll do creative things.”

“So, we don’t want to ask about cartographers,” Zoe said. “No one would tell us about them even if they knew something. It’ll only draw attention to us, and they won’t tell us anything. We want to ask about artists. People like that.”

She took Cassie’s face in her hands and kissed her on the forehead.

“Cassie, you’re a genius!” she said. “Aaron feels closer already.”

Cassie wiped the kiss away.

“Thanks,” Cassie said. “I don’t like to brag.”

They came to a man with a terrible combover. He stood with a cardboard box of fruit at his feet. He was attempting to flog the (obviously

stolen) fruit.

“You look like a healthy fellow,” Fruit Seller said to Bryan. “Would you care for some fruit? Freshly picked this morning.”

*Pick-pocketed more like*, Bryan thought. He bent down to pick up the fruit. He squeezed it, checking its firmness. They’d been dropped and squashed, badly bruised.

“This is quality produce,” Bryan said.

“Wait till you try my plums,” Fruit Seller said. “The biggest you’ve ever laid your eyes on, I swear.”

“Should I leave you two alone for a little quiet time?” Zoe whispered in Bryan’s ear.

“Perhaps you can help me,” Bryan said to Fruit Seller.

“I’m sure he can,” Zoe mumbled under her breath.

Bryan poked her savagely in the ribs.

“We’re looking for a talented artist,” he said. “We need him to do a landscape mural.”

“Landscape…” Fruit Seller said. “Landscape… Nope. Can’t say I know any landscape artists.”

“Or an artist of any type, really,” Bryan said.

Fruit Seller scratched his head, gradually becoming aware this customer had next to no interest in his merchandise.

“The only person I can think of who might be interested is a fella who paints ceramics,” he said. “You know, cups and plates. Those kinds of things.”

Bryan’s breath froze in his throat. Fruit Seller pursed his lips and then shook his head.

“Nah, on second thought I don’t think he’d be much interested in a big thing like that,” he said. “Forget I said anything.”

“I can’t forget it!” Bryan said, before comporting himself. “Do you know where he lives?”

“Sure,” Fruit Seller said. “Right behind you.”

# 24

THE SHOP was small and looked like something from a Dickens novel. The glass was not made with the modern method, and warped the color and shape of items inside. Not the ideal material for customers to peer through at the artwork on sale.

“I don’t get it,” Bryan said. “Why wouldn’t the king put guards on this guy? If he knows what the map of the kingdom looks like, I would keep him surrounded by guards day and night.”

“There are two ways to protect something,” Zoe said. “The first is to surround the subject with guards. It means everyone knows where he is and how many men are protecting him. It turns him into a target. The second is for him to hide under everyone’s nose. And maybe, some of the locals here know he’s the cartographer and keep an eye on him. They might even be undercover guards. That way you get the best of both worlds.”

“Great,” Bryan said, checking over his shoulders. “That really fills me with confidence.”

The family stood watching the shop for twenty minutes. It didn’t seem to garner a great amount of foot traffic. Art shops appeared to be about as popular underground as they were on the surface.

“We should be okay,” Bryan said. “Let’s go.”

“Wait,” Zoe said. “What about the people watching it?”

“There might not be anybody watching him,” Bryan said.

“Best to be safe,” Zoe said.

“The chances are this guy isn’t who we’re looking for anyway,” Bryan said. “But he might be able to help point us in the right direction.”

The family crossed the road, Zoe painfully aware of the eyes she imagined to be on her that very moment. Bryan pushed the door open, causing a little bell to chime.

An old man with tired eyes looked up from the counter. He’d clearly been sleeping. *Exactly like the surface,* Bryan thought.

“Good afternoon,” the old man said. “Please, come in.”

His voice verged on desperation. He probably hadn’t seen a customer in years, Bryan thought. Shelves ran along each wall at various heights. On them were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of items. The majority were little ceramic animals, painted in a careful hand with a fine brush. Other common items included individual plates, the sort used for the purpose of being displayed, not for dining.

“What kind of thing are you looking for?” the old man said.

“Oh,” Bryan said. “Something for my aunt. It’s her birthday next week.”

“If you’ll come over here, you’ll see a selection of our finest items for the mature lady,” the old man said.

“Thank you,” Bryan said, approaching the proffered shelf.

Zoe and Cassie spread out, covering a different shelf each. Bryan could see many of the items sported the same design. It resembled a city seen from the air, what a cartographer might draw, but disguised enough by style so it wasn’t openly obvious.

“Did you paint all these yourself?” Bryan said.

“Yes,” the old man said.

“They’re very beautiful,” Bryan said.

“Thank you,” the old man said.

He picked one of the items up—a lady figurine in a nineteenth century dress.

“This is one of our biggest sellers,” he said. “I’ve yet to hear of an auntie who disliked it.”

“Yes,” Bryan said. “I can see why. It’s very pretty.”

“Where are you from?” the old man said. “I’m trying to locate your accent, but can’t quite get a handle on it.”

“The East Islands,” Bryan said without thinking.

“The East Islands?” the old man said with a subtle shake of his head. “I’ve travelled the East Islands, and you don’t have their accent.”

“I’m from an obscure coastal village,” Bryan said.

“An obscure coastal villager isn’t likely to know the word ‘obscure’,” the old man said.

“You must have gone to the East Islands often to be able to recognize regional accents,” Bryan said, turning the situation back on him.

“Not really,” the old man said, looking away. “I just have an ear for those kinds of things.”

“An artist and an ear for sounds,” Bryan said. “Some of us are born with all the gifts.”

The old man smiled, but it looked distracted. He cast a look over at Zoe and Cassie, who had finished looking over their shelves. They moved down each narrow aisle. Bryan wished it didn’t look so much like sharks coming to feed, but that was exactly what was happening.

The old man must have sensed something was up because next he said: “I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“We haven’t asked all the questions we need answers to yet,” Bryan said.

The old man backed away, tripping over his own feet. He fell in slow motion. He seemed used to the movement, tucking his elbows in and letting his shoulder take the brunt of the impact.

“Are you okay?” Bryan said, reaching down to help him up.

“I don’t know,” the old man said. “Am I?”

“We’re not here to hurt you,” Bryan said.

“Then what are you here for?” the old man said.

“We have some questions about the maps you work on,” Bryan said.

“Maps?” the old man said with a chuckle that sounded forced. “The only things I paint are the things you see here. No maps. Please leave before I shout and call for the police.”

“Zoe, Cassie,” Bryan said. “Get the shutters, please.”

They pulled on the strings, lowering the slats over the windows. They locked the front entrance and blew out the candles, save the one at the back of the shop.

“I realize this must seem frightening,” Bryan said.

“What do you want?” the old man said with a quiver in his voice.

“We have need of the map of the British empire,” Bryan said.

“I told you-” the old man said.

“And we would like you to reconsider,” Bryan said. “You see, not so long ago we were captured by a pirate named Stoneheart. He took one of us hostage so the rest of us could find the treasure. And the only way we can do that is to get hold of the map. The British half. You see, Stoneheart is convinced it’s on this side of the world, and he won’t stop till he finds it.”

“Then what are you doing here?” the old man said.

“You’re a cartographer,” Bryan said.

“I’m an artist,” the old man said.

“Times are tough,” Bryan said. “You have to diversify. I can understand that.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you,” the old man said. “Even if I was who you think I am, which I’m not, I couldn’t give you the map. It would be treason. If you leave now, I’m sure you can continue your search elsewhere.”

Bryan knelt before the old man, joining him on the floor. The old man shied away, unsure of Bryan’s intentions. Bryan reached up and took a plate off its stand. The old man just stared, terrified Bryan would hit him over the head with it. Instead, Bryan showed him the picture.

“Your skills give you away,” he said. “Your style is similar to that of cartographers on the surface.”

“It’s… It’s my natural style,” the old man said.

Bryan sighed.

“Please sir,” he said. “I’m begging you. Help us.”

A lull in the conversation tugged the worst of the old man’s fear under the surface. A gentle knock came on the door.

“They’re here,” Zoe said.

“They?” the old man said. “They who? Why would someone knock on the door?”

“Because someone is watching your shop, to keep you safe,” Zoe said. “It’s nearing closing time, and someone will have noticed we came in here but haven’t left yet.”

“Guards?” the old man said, turning pale. “They know you’re here?”

The gentle knock came again.

“You need to tell them everything is fine,” Zoe said.

The old man looked even more afraid of guards than these strangers in his shop. Zoe took the old man’s head in her hands.

“Listen to me,” she said. “You can do this.”

“If they think I told you anything…” the old man said.

“You haven’t told us anything,” Zoe said. “We’ll tell them as much. But if you can help us… My son was taken from me by Stoneheart. He says he’s going to kill him if we fail to get the British map. That’s why we’re here. Why we need your help.”

“Your son?” the old man said, blinking. The news seeming to focus his attention. “He was taken from you?”

“Yes,” Zoe said. “I can get him back, but I need your help. You have to speak to the guards, maybe let them inside to see everything’s fine. You will tell them we left earlier. Make a few jokes.”

“I don’t make jokes,” the old man said.

“Okay,” Zoe said. “Just tell them how you normally would. That’s good. Don’t make them suspicious.”

The handle was depressed from the outside but met the lock. Someone sure wanted to get inside.

“How old is your boy?” the old man said.

“Fourteen,” Zoe said.

“Fourteen,” the old man said distantly.

“Can you do that?” Zoe said.

“Yes,” the old man said, gaining in confidence. “Yes, I can do that.”

“We’re not bad people,” Zoe said. “I promise you. We’re good people. You have nothing to fear from us.”

“Okay,” the old man said.

“Thank you,” Zoe said.

“Get behind the counter,” the old man said with a confidence he didn’t feel.

He couldn’t believe the words coming out of his mouth, couldn’t believe how steady his voice was. His heart was beating like a drum.

A loud knocking from a fist came on the door. The old man straightened his shirt, took a gulp of cold tea that sat on his counter, and reached for the door handle. His hand was shaking like he had Parkinson’s.

# 25

CARTOGRAPHER UNFASTENED the chain and opened the door a crack. He peered through the gap.

There was no one there.

He peered left to right, but still couldn't find anyone there. He shut the door, believing himself to have dodged a bullet. Then he thought better of it.

Assuming it had been a guard, there would be protocols, a system in place to ensure correct procedure. More guards would come. Where would that leave him then?

He opened the door and leaned out. A departing back was hurrying away from the shop.

"Excuse me?" the old man said, calling after the figure.

The figure didn't hear him and kept moving away. Cartographer cleared his throat and stepped outside.

"Excuse me?" he said, louder this time.

The figure paused and turned on her heel. Her eyes widened at the sight of Cartographer standing there. She took a few steps toward him. The guard, if that was what she was, wasn't ever meant to be seen by those she was watching. It was against protocol, and she would undoubtedly be reassigned now her cover was blown.

"Uh, hi," the woman said.

"Did you knock on my door earlier?" Cartographer said.

"Yes," the woman said. "I wanted to buy something for my mother and thought I would look around your shop. But I see you've closed early."

"It was a slow day," Cartographer said. "Decided to call it quits and shut up early."

The woman nodded, as if waiting for something.

"Would you like to take a look around?" Cartographer said.

"Would you mind?" the woman said.

"Not at all," Cartographer said.

He pushed the door open and held it for her so she might step inside.

“Let me put some lights on,” Cartographer said. “You won’t be able to see much otherwise.”

Cartographer lit some candles, giving the shop a magical atmosphere. The woman probed at the items, but seemed to keep a closer eye on the rest of the shop than the items she was meant to be looking at.

“What kind of thing are you looking for?” Cartographer said. “Something for your mother, you said?”

“Yes,” the woman said. “Any ideas? You have so much to choose from.”

“The items on this shelf tend to be very popular with the older female market,” Cartographer said, gesturing to a series of items sporting flower patterns.

“You do beautiful work,” the woman said.

“Thank you,” Cartographer said.

“I noticed some customers enter earlier,” the woman said. “Is there a backdoor out of here?”

“No,” Cartographer said with a nervous smile. “Just the one. They went out earlier. You must have missed them.”

“Yes,” the woman said. “I suppose I must have.”

Her expression was unreadable, and that made Cartographer even more nervous.

“You look nervous,” the woman said.

“I’m just tired,” Cartographer said. “It’s been a long day.”

“I thought it’d been quiet all day?” the woman said.

“It was,” Cartographer said. “Sometimes those are the longest days. Nothing to keep you distracted.”

“I hear that,” the woman said.

She cast one more look around the shop and seemed to find nothing of concern.

“I’m afraid I can’t find anything my mother would fall in love with,” she said. “Perhaps I can come back tomorrow and have another look?”

“By all means,” Cartographer said.

He led her to the door. She stepped out, walking away from him. The old man felt a sudden sharp pang of apprehension. If he wanted help, to be rescued from the strangers taking refuge in his shop, he ought to do it now, before the woman was gone.

But he didn’t say a word.

The young lady’s imploring green eyes had left a lasting impression on the old man, her pleading tones to help get her son back had resonated with him on a deep level. He might never see his son again, but she might see hers.

He locked the front door and moved to the back of the shop. He whispered to the three family members crouched there.

“Okay,” he said. “You can come out now.”

“Thank you for doing that,” Bryan said.

“You’re welcome,” Cartographer said. “Just make sure I won’t regret it.”

“That really depends on you,” Bryan said.

The tide of apprehension reared up inside the cartographer once again. He wondered just what he was letting himself in for.

# 26

CHIEF ENGINEER peered out the corner of his eye at Admiral for the third time since he'd been handed the blueprints. The question of where he had come across such plans was written plainly on his features, but it did not make the successful journey to his lips.

Chief Engineer was a middle-aged rotund fellow with snow white hair and a bushy white moustache that hid both his lips. At least, Admiral had assumed he had lips under there. It was hard to know if you hadn't seen them before. He was something of an engineering prodigy, the only man in the entire kingdom capable of carrying out his task.

He spent some time going over the plans, nodding and shaking his head at some details, gasping at others. He was somewhat of an eccentric, verging on genius, and Admiral gave him a great deal of autonomy. Admiral waited while the engineer made his appraisal.

Finally, he set the plans aside and leaned back in his chair with a deep frown. He pressed his fingertips together in front of his mouth, pinching his lips.

"Well?" Admiral said. "Is it possible?"

"Yes," Chief Engineer said. "It's possible to build. But I can't promise its effectiveness. The pressure may be too much for the materials to withstand for long."

"What if I told you there are methods to strengthen the materials we currently have?" Admiral said.

"Then I would say you would not only change the way we build ships, but everything in our world," Chief Engineer said. "It would kick off an industrial revolution the likes of which we have never seen. Though to be fully effective, we would need to remove all obstacles."

He said it with meaning. The pirates. They stood in the way of British innovation. Yet another reason to be rid of the sea rats.

The cowled man appeared again that night, stepping from the shadows as if he was made from them.

"Have you come to your decision?" he said in his somber tones.

“Yes,” Admiral said. “We can work together. I will build the contraptions in exchange for the technology you offered.”

“Good,” the cowled man said. “There are two things to note before we proceed. First, our deal is for the contraption, not the weapon it carries. Is that understood?”

“Weapon?” Admiral said. “There’s no weapon on the blueprints.”

“You will have to design your own,” the cowled man said.

Admiral pressed his lips together. If the cowled man had access to plans of ships like the one he’d given him, what kind of weapons did he have access to? The mind boggled.

“Perhaps we can do another deal for the weapon,” Admiral said.

“You have nothing more we require,” the cowled man said.

Admiral didn’t much like being spoken to in that tone of voice, but if he could get his hands on just one of these devices, it could solve all his problems. He was willing to put up with a little rudeness.

“Fine,” Admiral said. “What is your second note?”

“We expect completion six months from today,” the cowled man. “No excuses.”

Admiral nodded. The cowled man produced another document from the folds of his shroud. It was twice as thick as the blueprints file. Admiral couldn’t make head nor tail of its contents, but Chief Engineer assured him it was everything they wanted and more.

Admiral proceeded to divert all necessary resources to the secret project, blaming the pirates for any losses. Finally the pirates had proven useful to the kingdom. The perfect scapegoat. The king didn’t argue, knowing it to be his fault they were still in existence in the first place.

They were now two days shy of the promised day of completion. The cowled figure hadn’t turned up again to check progress. Admiral hoped he’d forgotten their agreement, but he knew this to be a pipedream. He knew the cowled figure would be back the day he said he would. Unless he missed his guess, the figure would arrive to the very minute of their agreement.

After the memorial ceremony, Admiral departed the city, heading to a tract of forest he’d purchased out of his own pocket. His carriage headed deep into the forest, passing the various security checkpoints he’d had set up.

In the heart of the woodland he climbed from his carriage and out onto a wide clearing. He stood outside what was the largest room in the world. He'd had sections built separately all over the kingdom, and then brought here and assembled by third parties.

He'd had the assemblers killed—quickly—there was no need to prolong their agony. In exchange, the families of the men had been set up in free houses with a lifetime of food. It was a sacrifice Admiral was willing to make.

Admiral was met by Chief Engineer. The prince had allowed him to handpick his assistants. They would all unwittingly receive the same deal the assemblers of the warehouse had, and be put to the sword the moment they had completed their task.

It was regrettable to waste such talented men, but Admiral would not lose the best minds for this task due to something as insignificant as a few deaths. The men should have felt honored to serve their king and country with pride and dignity.

Building of the contraptions had not been without obstacle. It took some time for the blacksmiths to perfect the metal folding process, to create the plastic and rubber molds. Everything proved more difficult than initially expected. Groundbreaking engineering was no easy feat, even when armed with God's step-by-step foolproof handbook.

The first few attempts had resulted in unacceptable quality levels that did not meet Chief Engineer's spec. But with practice and overcoming their own limitations, they eventually overcame these issues.

"We are progressing well," Chief Engineer said. "We should complete the project on the agreed date."

"Should?" Admiral said, allowing a trace of annoyance to enter his voice.

"We will," Chief Engineer said, correcting himself. "The first unit, your own personal unit, has already been transferred to the stern of The Revenge."

The Revenge was the pride and glory of the British fleet. She was both as swift as the wind and as fierce as a howling typhoon. She had been altered to cater for Admiral's new contraption.

"There's one slight hiccough," Chief Engineer said. "We have enough material to produce twenty-six ships, no more."

"Twenty-six?" Admiral said.

“The process is very intensive and requires a great deal of time and energy,” the chief engineer said.

“What if I got you more materials?” Admiral said.

“Then it will take longer than six months to produce,” Chief Engineer said.

The cowled figure wanted twenty-five ships. That left Admiral with just one for his own personal use. He’d been hoping he’d have his own fleet. Was one enough?

*It’ll have to be*, Admiral thought.

“Fine,” Admiral said. “Produce twenty-six. We’ll make more if they prove effective.”

“Oh, I’m sure they’ll be effective,” Chief Engineer said. “I don’t believe there’s anyone in the world who could stand against them.”

“Excellent,” Admiral said. “And everything is kept hush-hush, I trust?”

“Of course, sir,” Chief Engineer said. “Nothing has been leaked. No one knows about these machines save you and I. The most each individual worker knows is each segment they’re working on. I must say, we’re all looking forward to going home and seeing our friends and family. Six months is an unfathomably long period of time to be away from those you love.”

*Not when you’ve never been close to them*, Admiral thought.

Chief Engineer would never see his family again, of course. None of them would. They were all serving a higher purpose now. But Chief Engineer would at least be preserved from the slaughter. Admiral required him to fix the ship should it malfunction.

It was all a sacrifice Admiral was quite willing to make.

# 27

AARON STOOD on the prow of the ship, watching the horizon in the direction of New London, just as he had done when he watched his family pull away in the ship's boat. It was the first time he'd been left to fend for himself for as long as he could remember. It did not fill him with the feeling of being an adult as he'd imagined it would.

Smithy leaned on the railing beside him.

"Your family ain't never coming back," Smithy said. "You're going to stay here just like the rest of us. Adrift and lost and without hope."

"Is that what happened to you?" Aaron said. "Your family left you?"

"Nobody leaves Smithy," Smithy said. "Family are dead weight. They're balls and chains, locking you down, holding you back. Believe me, you'll be better off here, without them. The sooner you grow into a man, the better you'll be in the long run."

The fun and joviality Aaron enjoyed aboard the Celeste when he'd first arrived was no longer to be found, like a fun weekend turning sour come Monday. He kept looking over his shoulder expecting his family to be there, only they weren't.

He missed them all terribly, more than he could say with mere words. His tone and attitude was picked up by the crew, who were always quick to offer to play a few hands of Dead Man. Despite their raucous cheering and bleating, Aaron couldn't shake his melancholy.

He ate his meals by himself, not wanting to socialize and make chitchat. He became withdrawn and solitary. If it wasn't for Jim's constant intervention, Aaron would have slipped into a state of depression.

"Aaron," Jim said. "Come with me. We need to fetch some supplies for Chef."

He led Aaron to the stairs, and then deep down into the belly of the ship. Aaron kept his eyes on the floor when they passed the room where he and his family had slept till they had left. He'd need to find somewhere else to sleep.

"You miss them, don't you?" Jim said.

Aaron nodded. He didn't trust himself to speak, risking tears if he did.

“The others were the same when they first came here,” Aaron said. “Don’t let their blunt outward appearance fool you. They were every bit as upset and sad at leaving their families behind as you are now.”

“They all left their families behind?” Aaron said.

“Most,” Jim said. “The promise of permanent employment was too much of a pull. They all begin sending money home, but that always stops when they think about how much more rum they could drink if they kept the funds for themselves.

“Half came against their will. Stoneheart plied them with rum and then brought their unconscious bodies far out to sea. That way they have no choice but to crew the ship till they make port.”

“You were never sad?” Aaron said. “About leaving your family behind?”

“You have to have a family to be able to miss them,” Jim said.

“You must have a family,” Aaron said.

“Aye,” Jim said. “I probably have a family member or two out in the world, but I never met them, and likely never will. I wouldn’t know I had if I did. The crew is my family.”

“Lots of uncles,” Aaron said with a warm smile.

“Uncles prepare you for life, isn’t that what they say?” Jim said.

“Then you’re prepared for just about anything,” Aaron said. “You don’t remember anything from when you were young?”

“I remember a kind faced old lady,” Jim said. “She had rosy red cheeks that were smooth and used to smiling. And I remember green, grass or a garden or something.”

Aaron rounded a landing, dodging out of the way when a man came up the steps coming in the opposite direction.

“Excuse me,” the old man said.

He didn’t stop, and continued up the stairs.

“Wait,” Aaron said. “Was that…?”

“The one and only,” Jim said.

“I thought Stoneheart killed him?” Aaron said. “The old captain of the fishing trawler. What was his name? Lawson? Larson?”

“Are you sure you saw what you think you saw?” Jim said.

“I saw Stoneheart aim a pistol at the old man’s head and pull the trigger,” Aaron said.

“Then what did you witness?” Jim said.

“His body hit the deck and he didn’t move,” Aaron said.

“Did you see any blood?” Jim said. “There would have been a lot with a shot to the head like that.”

“Yes,” Aaron said.

“Are you sure?” Jim said.

He smiled, a glint in his mischievous eye. Aaron thought back to the scene. He’d seen the old man’s body hit the deck. He was sure he’d seen blood. But how could Larson be here now if he had?

“Larson is old, but he’s also brave,” Jim said. “It’s something Stoneheart looks for in his men. Loyalty follows quickly on the heels of bravery, he thinks. It takes bravery to be loyal, not vice versa.”

Aaron nodded.

“Doesn’t sound much like a bloodthirsty pirate,” he said.

“Don’t let him hear you say that,” Jim said. “A reputation can be destroyed a lot easier than it can be made.”

“You’re saying he doesn’t deserve the reputation he has?” Aaron said.

“I didn’t say that,” Jim said. “The crew are afraid of him. They believe it. I suppose in the end, that’s all that really matters.”

They came to the pantry. Jim took out a set of keys from his waist, sorted through them, found the right one, and inserted it into the lock.

“How did you come to be here?” Aaron said.

“The same as the others, I suppose,” Jim said. “Brought here against my own free will. But then, I suppose a baby doesn’t have much free will to begin with, does it?”

Glass jars of condiments and pickled vegetables, salted meat on the bone, and tins of every shape, color and size filled the shelves.

Jim began taking items off the shelves, needing to use a stepladder to reach those on the higher shelves.

“Grab the cheese, will you?” Jim said.

Aaron did.

“Urgh!” he said, before dropping it on the floor.

“What’s the matter?” Jim said.

“It’s green,” Aaron said.

“So?” Jim said. “That’s how cheese is supposed to be.”

“No it’s not,” Aaron said.

“No?” Jim said, frowning and exposing his bottom lip. “That’s the only type of cheese I’ve ever had.”

“It’s gone off,” Aaron said.

Jim shrugged.

“It hasn’t killed anyone yet,” he said. “Add it to the pile.”

Aaron picked the wedge of cheese up by the only patch of yellow he could identify, and placed it on the table.

“That’s about it, I think,” Jim said.

He paused and reached behind a row of pickled vegetables, using feel alone to find what he was looking for, and came out with a long flat object.

“Here,” Jim said. “Don’t tell anyone I gave you that.”

He opened the wrapper and snapped off two small squares of chocolate. He handed one to Aaron and popped the other in his own mouth.

Aaron let the heat of his salivating mouth melt the chocolate and run over his tongue. It was dark chocolate, his least favorite. It lacked the sweet sugar of what he was used to, but boy, did it taste good.

It was a small taste of the surface, his past, where he belonged. He shut his eyes and let himself get transported there. He didn’t need a Passage to go there. He could remember what it was like. Everything he’d ever seen, smelled and taken for granted flooded his senses.

“What are you thinking about?” Jim said.

“Hm?” Aaron said, opening his eyes.

“You were smiling,” Jim said.

“Was I?” Aaron said. “I was just thinking about home.”

“Must be nice, having a home,” Jim said

“You have a home,” Aaron said. “This ship is your home.”

“It’s a place I work and sleep,” Jim said. “I’m not sure I would call that a home. A home is meant to be a place, your own space, where you feel like you belong.”

Jim shrugged.

“That’s what the others said, anyway,” he said.

“There are many different kinds of families,” Aaron said. “You can have a family with a dozen fathers.”

“But no mother,” Jim said. “I saw the way Zoe looked at you, the way all mothers should look at their children, I think. I want that. And you’ve got a family out there now, trying to find where the treasure is so they can be with you again.”

“Do you think they’ll find it?” Aaron said.

“I don’t know,” Jim said. “No one has managed to find it before.”

“Maybe there’s no such thing to find anyway,” Aaron said. “Maybe they’re doomed to failure. What’ll happen to me if they don’t find the treasure?”

“I don’t know,” Jim said. “I wish I did.”

“Will the captain hurt me?” Aaron said.

Jim was silent for a long time.

“We should be getting back to the kitchens,” he said.

They scooped the items up in their arms. Jim shut the door and locked it. His noncommitted response didn’t fill Aaron with confidence.

# 28

“NO MATTER how many times you tell me there are guards watching over me, I can’t bring myself to believe it,” Cartographer said. “Why didn’t they tell me they were taking care of me?”

“Because they would hardly be a secret force then, would they?” Cassie said.

“I suppose not,” Cartographer said. “So, where are you really from?”

“The surface,” Zoe said.

“The surface of what?” Cartographer said.

“Of the world,” Zoe said.

It took a moment for the penny to drop, and when it did, it resulted in the rising of the cartographer’s wispy white eyebrows and the wrinkles to pile up on his tall forehead.

“*The* surface?” Cartographer said.

“Yes,” Zoe said.

“But they were just myths,” Cartographer said. “Old stories from a time long ago.”

“Well, they’re true,” Zoe said.

“Is it true what they say?” Cartographer said. “You sit on fluffy white clouds and play harps?”

“Okay, the stories aren’t entirely true,” Zoe said. “The surface is a lot like it is here. People going about their lives, some doing good things, some bad. Just getting by.”

“I’ve always wondered what it must be like up there, if there even was a surface at all,” Cartographer said. “What it must look like, what the maps were like.”

“I can show you, if you want,” Zoe said.

“I would love that,” Cartographer said.

“I’m no artist like you, but I can give you a vague idea of what it looks like,” Zoe said. “My knowledge of Asia is a little sketchy.”

“Asia is real too?” Cartographer said, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Sure,” Zoe said. “It’s a large continent.”

“So there are such things as continents!” Cartographer said, dumbfounded.

He balled his hands into fists and held them above his head, a look of surprised approval on his face.

“Sorry,” he said. “I had a wager with one of the other cartographers. It seemed strange to me to have a word like ‘continent’ when there was only one real landmass here. I figured it was from a time when the world had a different shape, when there were many continents.”

“There are six continents,” Zoe said.

“Six!” Cartographer said. “And I was right—about how they keep moving around?”

“You were,” Zoe said. “It’s due to plate tectonics and processes called-”

“Enough with the lecture,” Bryan said. “We need to focus. We’ve got an important mission to complete. Here’s the deal: if we get the information we need, we’ll give you as much information about the surface as you’d like.”

“Sounds fair enough,” Cartographer said.

“We need to get our hands on the map,” Bryan said. “How do we go about doing that?”

“You don’t,” Cartographer said. “Only King and Admiral have access to the complete map. I’m in charge of just a small part of the map. No one but the king and Admiral has access to the whole map. If anyone else did, there might be a chance that they would sell it to the pirates and live on one of their islands, living like a king.”

“How many cartographers are there?” Zoe said.

“Seven,” Cartographer said.

“Too many,” Bryan said. “We’ll never be able to locate them all.”

“The only piece I have is the one I’m responsible for,” Cartographer said.

He moved to a drawer, hesitated, and then opened it. He lifted up a secret section in the bottom and extracted a rolled up piece of parchment.

“And you haven’t even seen the other pieces?” Bryan said.

The cartographer’s mouth opened, like he was about to reply without thinking, a cookie-cutter response.

“You can be honest with us,” Bryan said.

“And you’re sure you’re not from the government?” Cartographer said.

“We aren’t affiliated with any government,” Bryan said. “Well, Zoe is, up on the surface she works for a non-profit, but that hardly affects us down here.”

“What’s a non-profit-” Cartographer said.

“Sir, please try and focus,” Bryan said.

“Right, right,” Cartographer said. “I have seen the rest of the map. But only a series of glances. It’s treason for me to admit this to you. We’re supposed to keep our eyes on the floor at all times.”

“Do you think you could draw what you saw of the rest of the map?” Bryan said.

The cartographer shook his head.

“No,” he said. “It’s too complicated.”

“If you shut your eyes now, do you think you can see it?” Zoe said. “It’s an old memory trick. Try it.”

The cartographer shut his eyes and pictured the map.

“It was just a bunch of glances, like I said,” he said.

“Cassie, get some paper and a pencil,” Zoe said.

Cassie opened two drawers before she came to what she was looking for. She took out three sheets and a blunt pencil, placing them before the cartographer. Zoe put the pencil in the old man’s hand and placed it on the table.

“Try to sketch what you saw,” she said. “Anything you remember could be really useful.”

The old man began to draw, tracing a rough shape, and the longer he did it, the more he grew in confidence, his movements becoming smooth and controlled. He opened his eyes to find he had gone off the page and onto a second piece, where Zoe had lined them up so Cartographer could continue drawing uninterrupted.

“That’s the rough shape,” Cartographer said. “As well as I can recall, anyway. Now, as for the details, I think there was a town here.”

“Draw it,” Zoe said.

The old man did, and as he kept drawing, he added three forests and a long windy line that looked like a road that linked three of the small towns he’d drawn.

“If King knew I could recall the map in this much detail my head would be on the chopping block,” Cartographer said. “So would all the cartographers’.”

“Good thing no one else knows then, isn’t it?” Bryan said.

He looked at the picture. It showed a large landmass with rolling plains fenced in by tall mountains on one side and the sea on the other.

“It’s not very detailed I’m afraid,” Cartographer said.

“You did a great job,” Zoe said, laying a comforting hand on his back.

“But it doesn’t help us out much, does it?” Bryan said. “There’s no sign of where the treasure might be.”

“You can’t give it to the pirates,” Cartographer said. “They’ll use it to kill innocent people. But the truth is, you’re wasting your time even looking for the treasure.”

“If the treasure isn’t on the British side, why don’t you give us the whole map?” Bryan said.

“For our own safety,” Cartographer said. “You see, if the pirates had the map of our area they would rape and pillage their way up and down the coast, and there will be no way to escape them. What they lose by not finding the treasure, they’ll make up by taking from the poor. I’m sorry about your son. Really, I am. But there’s nothing you can do once the powers that be have him in their clutches.”

“But there is something we can do,” Bryan said. “We just need to find the location of the treasure.”

The cartographer let out a bark of laughter.

“Then you were better off where you were before,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Bryan said.

“The treasure is on the pirates’ side of the world,” Cartographer said.

“What?” Bryan said. “No. It can’t be.”

“It is,” Cartographer said. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, but we’ve combed every inch of our side of the world and there is no sign of the treasure. It can only be on their side.

“Legends are dangerous things. They can grip a mind and make it obsessed, and the legend might not even be real. This war has lasted this long because of such a legend. There might be other reasons for fighting now, like destroying one another’s ship, but when you peek under the surface, when you lift up its edges, you can see what this war is really about. The treasure. It always has been, and always will be.”

“And if the treasure is discovered one day?” Bryan said.

The cartographer glanced up, his look pinning Bryan in place.

“Then it would be the end of the war,” Cartographer said. “Sure, there will still be a few scuffles for power, but once that original instigator was revealed to all, there would be nothing more they could reasonably fight over. The people would wake up, relieved of their cause for grievance.

“Don’t you think the rich on this side of the world haven’t wasted entire fortunes in trying to locate it? If it was here someone would have discovered it by now.”

“Then what would you suggest we do?” Zoe said. “Murdering psychopaths have my son and they’re not going to let him go unless we tell them the location of the treasure.”

She ran her hands through her hair in desperation. They were in a total losing position. They were never going to get Aaron back again.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Cartographer said.

“What is?” Zoe said.

“You make a map and tell them where the treasure is,” Cartographer said.

“But we don’t know where it is,” Cassie said.

“So you lie,” Cartographer said.

“This is Aaron’s life we’re talking about,” Zoe said. “We can’t leave something like that up to the chance they might believe us.”

“We won’t,” Bryan said. “We’ll spend the time coming up with ways to spring Aaron loose. Look here.”

He gestured to the segment of map the cartographer had spread on the table.

“The meeting point at Hollow Cove isn’t all that far from the Demon Isles,” Bryan said.

“I’m not sure I’m liking the direction this plan is going,” Cassie said.

“We’ll go where they refuse to go,” Bryan said. “We’ll distract the pirates with the map and treasure location, grab Aaron and make a break for it.”

“You want to lay a trap for the Mary Celeste,” Zoe said. “And use it to spring Aaron free and get to the Demon Isles before they can stop us. That’s the crux of it, isn’t it? It’s hardly foolproof, is it?”

“We’d better know what we’re doing,” Cassie said. “One mistake and we’ll be dead for sure.”

“Is this your son?” Zoe said, gesturing to a family portrait on the wall.

“It is,” Cartographer said.

“He’s a good looking boy,” Zoe said. “He’s got your chin.”

“Only my chin, fortunately,” Cartographer said. “Everything else, he got from his mother.”

“He looks smart,” Zoe said.

“He is,” Cartographer said. “He was top of his class in math.”

“So is Aaron,” Zoe said.

Cartographer sighed. His body deflated.

“Look, I want to help you, really I do,” he said. “But there’s nothing I can do that won’t endanger my son. They took him, said they would take care of him. Now I live letter to letter, hearing about him, not from him, never knowing how he really is. He works directly for Admiral. It’s meant to be honorable, but it doesn’t feel that way to me. The letters could be fake for all I know.”

“Fake,” Cassie said. “We could give Stoneheart a fake map of the British empire.”

The idea came from nowhere, and it took a moment for the full implications of such an action to sink in, including Cassie too. It was a subconscious burbling, popping like a bubble on the surface of a tarpit.

“Great idea,” Zoe said. “That way we wouldn’t have to worry about the pirates coming onto the land to pillage innocents. They would arrive to find nothing there. The map we give them would be all but useless to them.”

“How are we supposed to explain how we got this map?” Bryan said.

“We’ll tell them the truth,” Zoe said. “Or half-truth. That we kidnapped a cartographer and got him to draw the map for us.”

“And where shall we say the treasure actually is?” Bryan said.

“The Mountains of Mist,” Cartographer said.

“Where’s that?” Zoe said.

“Nowhere,” Cartographer said. “Not yet, anyway.”

“Because you’ll make it all up,” Bryan said. “Yes.”

“So we’re doing this?” Zoe said.

“With the time we have, the resources, it’s about all we’re capable of,” Bryan said.

“A forced plan by necessity,” Zoe said. “That really fills me with confidence.”

# 29

THE CAPTAIN had once again stuffed himself to bursting with food. He was already half asleep by the time Aaron entered the room. Still, Aaron's lip curled into a sneer. At the beginning, he'd enjoyed telling stories. It was a way to express himself, and he liked having a captive audience. But now the stories felt forced and didn't come easily to him.

The captain had noticed, and was quick to point out any holes and lack of consistency. Aaron had other things on his mind, not least of all what the captain might do to him should his parents not return with the location of the treasure as agreed. But with the dark cloud on the captain's brow, Aaron realized he had a much more real and present danger to concern himself with.

Jim sat on the writing desk with a knife, whittling a piece of wood.

"I've got another story to tell you, if you're interested," Aaron said. "It involves pirates, though they're not the main characters in the story."

"But they will feature?" Stoneheart said.

"Yes," Aaron said. "They're an important part of the story. There was once a boy called Peter Pan."

"Stupid name," Stoneheart said, getting comfortable.

"He lived in a world called Neverland," Aaron said. "And in this place, he never aged. He lived young, forever. And he wasn't the only one. There were other boys like him, his gang of friends, who he called the Lost Boys. And what was most amazing about these boys wasn't the fact they didn't age, but the fact they could fly. By thinking of something that made them happy, they could soar high above the treetops, like birds.

"But not everyone in this world was like the Lost Boys. There were pirates aboard a ship in the reef, captained by a man called Hook. He had a missing hand that had been replaced by a metal hook, and that's how he got his name."

"Very impractical," Stoneheart said.

"He tried to capture the Lost Boys, Peter Pan more than any other," Aaron said. "And he always failed. But that was because Peter Pan knew something he didn't, and that was how to be happy. By thinking of all the

happy times he'd had in his life, and even if he couldn't really fly, it made him feel like he could. And that was something the pirates could never understand."

"I don't like this story," Stoneheart said.

"Neither do I," Aaron said. "But I thought you might have liked it all the same."

"Well, I don't," Stoneheart said. "Tell me something else."

"Like what?" Aaron said.

"You're the storyteller," Stoneheart said. "You tell me."

"How about mermaids?" Aaron said.

"You told me about those already," Stoneheart said.

"The kraken?" Aaron said.

"Yes, all right," Stoneheart said. "Though I could probably tell you more about them than you could tell me."

"So maybe you can tell me the story tonight," Aaron said, hoping for a night off.

"No," Stoneheart said. "It's your job to tell me stories, so tell me."

Aaron collated everything he could think about krakens from movies he'd seen and books he'd read. He added in everything he'd seen about octopi and squids too for good measure, and though he couldn't make a good story out of it, he could reel off a bunch of facts. They were enough to get the captain asking questions, and that was half the battle.

At some point Jim had stopped whittling. He sat with his unfinished piece of woodwork on his lap.

# 30

THE MAP was a piece of art. It showed the contours of a beautiful nation, with New London, New Birmingham and all the other cities on this side of the world clearly drawn.

"That's great," Bryan said.

He began to roll it up.

"Wait," Cartographer said. "It's not finished yet."

Bryan laid it out flat again.

"I don't know what else you can do to make it look better," he said.

"Making it look better isn't the purpose," Cartographer said.

He upended his cup of tea over the parment. Bryan snatched the map up.

"What are you doing?" he said, staring at the Cartographer like he's lost his marbles.

The cartographer pulled Bryan's hands away and dabbed at the spilled tea, spreading it across the paper's surface.

"A map like this would have been around for centuries," he said. "It would have exchanged many men's hands, would have been swept by the wind and rain and dirtied by blood and sweat."

He put the parchment to his teeth and tore along one side. He stabbed at it with his pencil and folded it as if it had been put in someone's pocket at some point.

"It's valuable, and men would have killed one another for it," Cartographer said. "If it comes back looking too clean, too new, Stoneheart will never believe it is genuine."

The cartographer was right, of course. He clearly knew his business. But still, Bryan didn't like to see a piece of art get abused.

Cassie and Zoe lay asleep on the twin sofas, legs and arms hanging over the sides, sofas too short to support their whole bodies. Zoe had been up most of the night telling the cartographer everything she knew about mountains, geology, time and the other planets that populated the solar system.

All the while, the cartographer worked on his map, raising his eyes only to confirm what Zoe was telling him about the Earth and its orbit, shaking

his head in disbelief at everything the people on the surface had discovered.

“Do you think Stoneheart will believe the map’s real?” Bryan said.

“Would you?” Cartographer said.

Bryan looked down at the map again, this time with its stamp of time. If Bryan had seen it, he wouldn’t have questioned its authenticity. He would never have guessed it was bogus. So long as Stoneheart believed how the family had come across the map in the first place, and that was something they’d given a great deal of thought, there was no reason he wouldn’t believe them.

“I have some bread and cheese,” Cartographer said. “Perhaps you would like some breakfast before you go? It’s likely to be a long day ahead.”

“Yes please,” Bryan said.

The cartographer headed downstairs. Zoe grunted and stretched, extending her arms. She opened her eyes and found Bryan standing over her.

“Is it done?” she said. “Did he finish the map?”

“Yes,” Bryan said. “He did.”

“How does it look?” Zoe said.

“Come and take a look for yourself,” Bryan said.

Zoe threw her legs over the side of the sofa, stood up, and stretched her back and legs. She yawned and approached the table.

“Wow,” she said.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Bryan said. “It must be great to have a talent like this.”

“You do have a talent like this,” Zoe said.

“What?” Bryan said.

“For business,” Zoe said. “That’s every bit as impressive as being able to create a piece of art like this.”

“Doesn’t look so impressive on the outside though, does it?” Bryan said.

“Office buildings and people with jobs inside them look plenty impressive to me,” Zoe said.

“Then you’re very easily impressed,” Bryan said.

There was a rattling noise outside the door as the cartographer came up the stairs carrying a tray. Bryan opened the door and relieved the old man of the tray’s weight.

“Thank you,” Cartographer said. “I swear those stairs get taller every day.”

He wiped at his sweaty brow with his sleeve and took a seat. On the tray was a pot of tea, a loaf of bread, and hard cheese.

“Sorry it’s not much,” Cartographer said.

“It’s a feast compared to what we’re used to,” Zoe said.

She began cutting the bread into slices and adding the cheese. She handed a slice to each person.

“You did a beautiful job with the map,” Zoe said.

“Thank you,” Cartographer said. “I hope it’ll help. Have you thought much about the story you’re going to spin the captain?”

“Yeah,” Bryan said, swallowing a large mouthful of bread. “We’ll practice it this morning as we make our way to the meeting place at Hollow Cove.”

“Good,” Cartographer said, nodding. “Good.”

He looked distracted.

“Is something wrong?” Zoe said.

“Wrong?” Cartographer said. “No. Why would there be anything wrong?”

He smiled, but it didn’t last. His face folded up on itself and his eyes shimmered with tears.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Hey,” Zoe said, wrapping her arm around his narrow shoulders. “It’s okay. Everything’s going to be all right. You’ll see.”

Cartographer nodded and put his face in his hands.

“My son…” he said. “I haven’t spoken to him in so long. I hope you understand. I see him sometimes, at least I think I do, at Admiral’s beck and call. I never wanted that for him. But at least he’s alive, at least he’s safe.”

“I’m sorry we couldn’t find this treasure everyone is looking for,” Bryan said. “If we could, we might have been able to help end this war for good.”

They woke Cassie and gave her a slice of bread and cheese. She gobbled it down hungrily. The family packed up their things, Bryan taking special care to fold the map correctly and tuck it in his pocket. The family headed downstairs to the empty shop.

“Take some extra food with you,” Cartographer said.

“No,” Bryan said. “It’s all you have.”

“I can get more,” Cartographer said.

He rubbed his hands together.

“I want you to do me a favor,” he said.

“Anything,” Bryan said.

“If you see my son, please tell him… Tell him to come home,” Cartographer said.

“We will,” Bryan said.

Cartographer unlocked the shop entrance door and pulled it open.

A dozen uniformed soldiers stood in front of the shop brandishing weapons.

The bell chimed sweetly.

# 31

AARON HAD never been so tired, both physically and mentally. What hadn't been sucked from him during the day was drawn from him at night by the relentless questions asked of him by the captain. And then Aaron had to help Jim put Stoneheart to bed.

Aaron turned to head below deck. He took the first step. He hopped back as if it was red hot. He wasn't going to head down those steps to sleep, and he wasn't going to lay his head on the sail Cassie had blagged to use as a blanket either.

He walked along the deck to find a new place to sleep, but found most of the comfortable places taken. He headed to the ship's boat, pulled back the tarpaulin top, and, finding it empty, pulled himself over the side and into its bottom. Sleep found him easily, but it wasn't ten minutes before he was jolted awake as the ship's boat cajoled left to right.

He peered over the edge, difficult to find his feet. Jim was pulling on the ropes to raise the ship's boat off the deck, working first one rope, tying it off, and then working the other.

"What are you doing?" Aaron said.

"I don't know what's going to happen to you if your family doesn't come back," Aaron said. "Which is why you need to prepare yourself."

"How?" Aaron said.

"You should leave, now," Jim said. "Get out of here while you still can."

"My family will come get me," Aaron said.

"They won't come get you," Jim said. "They'll try their best, but there is no way they'll find the treasure. People have been trying for centuries. Why would they be able to find it now? They won't. You need to get out of here."

"But when my family come here…" Aaron said.

"They won't come here!" Jim said, stomping his foot on the deck.

A crewmember snorted before rolling over, back to sleep. Aaron sighed, his shoulders slumping.

"Your family will leave you," he said. "You can't trust them. They won't come looking for you, just as mine never came looking for me.

They’ll realize they’ll never find the treasure and won’t come here. But you don’t have to be a Lost Boy. Only I do.”

Jim pulled on the ropes.

“Stop,” Aaron said.

Jim didn’t.

“I said, stop!” Aaron said.

Jim did, keeping hold of the rope between his small, but thick and strong hands.

“My family *will* come for me,” Aaron said. “You just wait and see.”

“If you don’t go now, you won’t be able to get away,” Jim said.

Aaron gave it some serious thought.

“I’ll go,” he said. “But only if you come with me. We’ll get to the land and together we’ll find my family so they don’t need to come see the captain.”

“Leave?” Jim said.

“Join me and my family,” Aaron said. “They will take good care of you, I promise. And when we get back to the surface, you’ll fit in. You can be in all my classes with me.”

“The surface?” Jim said. “No. I can’t go up to the surface. My place is down here.”

“Then we’ll both stay,” Aaron said. “My family will come. And they will find the treasure. You wait and see.”

# 32

“NO MATTER how hard we prepare there’s just no preparing for fate’s plans, is there?” Admiral said.

He turned to face Bryan, Zoe and Cassie, who stood with their arms above their heads, trussed up with ropes wrapped around a metal pipe. The family was in the belly of the The Revenge, the British navy’s biggest and most powerful ship, the pride of the king’s forces. The room was dark and dingy, the walls wet with some kind of algae.

“But then, I hardly need to educate you on that, do I?” Admiral said.

“Please,” Bryan said. “Let them go. They haven’t done anything wrong.”

“You were caught together, and so you shall be tried together,” Admiral said.

“Trial?” Bryan said. “We don’t have time for a trial.”

“No time?” Admiral said. “Are the pirates planning an attack? Is that why you’re here?”

“We told you already,” Bryan said. “We were dumped here by a Passage, and now we’re just trying to find our way out again.”

He’d neglected to tell Admiral about meeting Stoneheart, or his desire for the map. Any mention of pirates only made Admiral angry.

“You have little time for anything else,” Admiral said. “This is the first time I’ve heard someone wishing they had *less* time before going to trial.”

He picked up the folded map on a small side table.

“You wanted a map of our kingdom,” Admiral said. “So you kidnapped a cartographer and made him make one.”

“But it isn’t a map of your kingdom,” Bryan said. “It’s a fake. It doesn’t bear any resemblance to the real map.”

“And how would you know that?” Admiral said. “Perhaps the cartographer revealed he knew more about our maps than he initially led us to believe?”

“He has done nothing wrong,” Bryan said. “Save trying to help strangers.”

“Why should I believe you?” Admiral said. “You broke the law in confronting a cartographer. You had a map made. For what purpose?”

“I’ve told you,” Bryan said.

He was exhausted. He and the others had been grilled for hours, and time was growing short. If they didn’t escape soon they might never get to Hollow Cove to meet Stoneheart, hand over the map, and rescue Aaron.

Just then, like someone above had heard his plea, there was a knock on the door.

“Come,” Admiral said.

The door opened, revealing a uniformed sailor. He saluted and handed a note to Admiral. There was something familiar about the sailor, though Bryan couldn’t quite put his finger on it. Something about the shape of his chin…

Admiral took the note and unfolded it. He read it, nodded to the sailor, and turned back to the family.

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to excuse me,” he said. “I have urgent business to take care of.”

“Please, let us go,” Bryan said. “We’ve done nothing wrong.”

“You got caught,” Admiral said. “Which means you must have been doing something wrong.”

He stepped out of the room and into the corridor. The door shut behind him. The family was alone.

“This is great,” Zoe said. “Just peachy.”

The pipe rumbled above their heads. Bryan could feel something pass through it at high speed. If he hadn’t known better, he would have guessed they were water pipes, but what need did a ship such as this have for the use of water pipes? There was little Bryan knew about ships, so he supposed there was always the chance they were used for some purpose he had no concept of.

Something dribbled from the imperfect joins in the pipe and landed on Bryan’s cheek.

“Eugh!” Bryan said.

“What?” Zoe said. “What is it?”

Whatever the liquid was, it did not slide down Bryan’s face as water would have. Instead it seemed to stick to his skin and move at a snail’s pace. He turned his head to one side to wipe his face on the shoulder of his

shirt, leaving a black streak. He tried to peer down at it, but it was at an awkward angle.

“It’s oil,” Zoe said.

“Oil?” Bryan said. “What does a boat like this need oil for?”

“Maybe it’s used for heating or something,” Zoe said.

Bryan shook his head.

“These pipes look relatively new to me,” he said. “Like they were recently added.”

“So maybe they made recent refurbishments,” Zoe said.

Bryan nodded, though he didn’t look very convinced by that argument.

“Have you come up with it yet?” Cassie said.

“Come up with what?” Bryan said.

“Your harebrained scheme to get us out of here,” Cassie said.

“Well, when you say it like that…” Bryan said.

“Go on,” Cassie said. “I’m only teasing.”

“This pipe isn’t all that big,” Bryan said. “If we all pulled on it at once, force our weight down, we might stand a chance of pulling the pipe clear and getting out of here.”

“Huh,” Cassie said.

“What?” Bryan said.

“Not so harebrained after all,” Cassie said.

“Thank you,” Bryan said.

“Can any of you see a weak join in the pipe anywhere?” Zoe said.

“Right here,” Bryan said. “Where it dripped on me.”

“Cassie,” Zoe said. “Slide up behind me. We’ll get as close to Bryan as we can.”

Zoe and Cassie shuffled up to Bryan, spooning one another.

“Okay,” Bryan said. “On the count of three take your feet off the ground and hang from the pipe. Remember to hold onto your restraints, otherwise they might cut off the circulation to your wrists and hands. Ready? One, two, three. Go!”

They let go and hung there, turning slightly left to right.

“Um…” Cassie said.

The pipe took their weight and appeared to have no problem doing so.

“Hop,” Bryan said.

They hopped on the spot, forcing their weight down. The pipe began to creak, sounding like it was going to give way. Bryan froze, and turned to

look at the door.

"Sh!" Bryan said. "Stop. stop!"

"What?" Zoe said. "It's working!"

"Someone's coming!" Bryan said. "Shuffle back over to your side!"

They did, removing themselves just in time as the door opened, revealing the sailor who'd brought Admiral's note. Bryan flashed him a smile as he entered.

"Howdy," Bryan said.

The sailor looked the family over, taking in their sheepish smiles.

"What's going on here?" he said.

"Just hanging," Bryan said.

The expression was too modern for the sailor to understand, and he took only its literal meaning.

"I can see that," he said.

He closed the door behind him and stood in front of it.

"Your boss isn't coming to see us again?" Bryan said.

"He wants me to keep an eye on you in case you try something," the sailor said.

"Try what?" Zoe said. "There's little we can do hanging here like this."

"Perhaps," the sailor said. "But he doesn't trust you. Neither do I."

Bryan kept his eyes focused firmly on the sailor, and tried to ignore what was oozing down his fingers and hands. He shifted his arms slightly so the liquid would roll over his restraints and wrists, but gave no outward indication he could feel it.

"Your father is an artist, isn't he?" Zoe said.

The sailor's eyes moved to the side.

"The cartographer we met, the one who drew the map for us, was your father," Zoe said. "You have his chin. He asked us to tell you to return home."

"My name is First Mate," the sailor said.

The skin around his eyes and mouth tightened.

"He's a good man," Zoe said. "Kind and just. He wanted to help us because there was nothing he could do to help rescue you."

"Shut up," First Mate said. "He's an old fool who sent me here. It was no choice of mine. And I…"

He turned his head to one side, tears stinging his eyes. Bryan took the opportunity to use the oil to slip his right wrist free of his restraints. He

quickly raised his hand back up, as First Mate raised his eyes once again.

Bryan was free. But he wasn't really free until he could take care of First Mate. He didn't want to hurt him, but judging by Zoe's lack of success at talking with him, a little violence was unavoidable.

He would knock the boy out somehow—a hard strike across the skull perhaps? No. Bryan couldn't bring himself to harm an innocent, even if it prevented Bryan and his family from escaping.

He could tie him up and make him the prisoner. Someone would discover him eventually, but it was the only thing he could think of to do under the circumstances. He just needed to pick the right time to take action and prevent the cartographer's son from making any unnecessary noise.

"I am lucky to be here," First Mate said. "I serve Admiral, the king, and his honor."

"Your father is a good man, a great man," Bryan said. "He tried to help us rescue Zoe's son, Aaron. And when we return the map to Stoneheart at Hollow Cove, we'll have your father to thank, not his traitorous son."

"Bryan," Zoe said, alarmed at how much of their story Bryan was giving away. "What are you doing?"

Bryan didn't break eye contact with First Mate.

"He wanted to be proud of you," he said, increasing the pressure. "But you're a disappointment. I'm glad he never got to see the kind of fool you've become."

"You don't know a thing about what I've been through," First Mate said through gritted teeth. "The kinds of things I've witnessed."

"Witnessed, but never lifted a finger to prevent," Bryan said. "You're a disgrace to your father."

First Mate tightened his fists, knuckles turning white. He moved forward. He was going to loosen his anger at Bryan with both barrels, who was powerless to defend himself.

Except that wasn't true. His hands were free.

He ducked First Mate's blow and wrapped his arm around the boy's neck. He kicked and flailed, but Bryan kept hold of him. He waited for the boy's flailing limbs to cease, his eyes bulging like he was going to die.

Out of breath, Bryan got to his feet and helped Zoe and Cassie with their bonds.

"You killed him?" Zoe said. "But he's just a boy!"

“I didn’t kill him,” Bryan said. “He’s just unconscious.”

Zoe bent down and pressed her fingers to First Mate’s neck. She breathed a sigh of relief.

“How did you do this?” she said.

“A self defense course I took once,” Bryan said. “I never thought it would actually be useful.”

“God bless self development courses,” Cassie said.

“What are we going to do with him?” Zoe said.

“Tie him up,” Bryan said. “Give me a hand.”

Together they tied First Mate up on the floor. They stuffed his mouth with a dirty handkerchief from Bryan’s pocket to prevent him from shouting for help.

“Someone will come find him eventually,” Zoe said.

“Sure,” Bryan said. “But with any luck we’ll be long gone by then.”

Bryan scooped up their map and tucked it in his pocket.

Cassie swayed on her feet, reaching out to steady herself on a table.

“Woah!” she said.

Bryan and Zoe felt it too, as the boat moved beneath their feet, almost sending them sprawling on their asses.

“What was that?” Cassie said.

“It’s the boat,” Zoe said. “We’re moving. We’re casting off.”

# 33

THE CABIN DOOR creaked open, a long high-pitched whine like it really didn’t want to commit the action. Bryan listened first, and then edged out into the corridor.

The majority of the crew would be up on the main deck, but there might be a few completing tasks below deck too. He listened intently, straining for even the slightest noise. They couldn’t creep past all those sailors above. How were they going to get out?

The Revenge was large and would take a while for it to get moving at a fair clip, even longer for it to get to full speed. They needed to escape immediately. They would still be in the dock and could jump into the shallows and swim to shore, but they needed to do it from below deck.

Voices.

The family froze. They were approaching an intersection. The voices appeared to be coming from the starboard side. They turned around and ran back the way they had come, turning down another corridor. They stood there, waiting, listening.

The voices became louder as they entered the intersection, and then louder still as they headed in the family’s direction.

Bryan’s eyes widened to the size of saucers. He gestured for them all to turn and head farther down the corridor. They turned another corner, just as the voices took the preceding turn. Wherever the sailors were heading, it was in the same direction the family were going.

“Here!” Cassie hissed.

She stood before a large door. She gripped the handle and began to slide it aside. It was heavy and took all three of them. They stepped inside the room and pulled the door closed behind them.

They pressed their backs to the door and waited as the voices approached. They waited with bated breath as the voices passed, the words indistinguishable, and continued on down the corridor.

The family breathed a sigh of relief.

“They’re gone,” Zoe said.

Her voice had a faint echo quality to it. They turned to face the room they now found themselves occupying. Light filtered in from porthole windows along the back of the room. It was the largest room Bryan had ever seen on a boat. It was empty, save for a large crate in the center. There was a large lock on it and several sliding bars. Whatever was inside must have been valuable.

“This whole room looks like it’s designed to be submerged,” Zoe said.

As Bryan looked closer, he was surprised to find Zoe was right. It was not the kind of room you’d expect to find in a galleon. There were rust marks along the walls, creases and joins, and several levers in each corner. What their purpose was, Bryan couldn’t say, but they looked complicated.

But there was something he did recognize. He moved to a small manhole cover-like door in the floor. He fingered the latches and handles.

“What is it?” Zoe said.

“It’s a hatch,” Bryan said. “I think we can escape through them.”

He pulled on the handles and twisted them so they were at a right angle to the lock. The lock hissed, and water rushed out from the rim. Bryan reached down and pulled the hatch up. The water bubbled, spitting at him, but it did not rush up through the hatch.

“You first,” Bryan said.

“Wait,” Zoe said. “We don’t know where these hatches lead to, if they even lead anywhere.”

“No,” Bryan said. “But we have no other choice. It’s either we go through this hatch or we hand ourselves over to the British soldiers.”

Cassie looked at the gurgling, burbling water. She didn’t look sure about going through the hatch. Bryan couldn’t blame her, but there was little else for it. They had to go through. They were out of time.

Cassie sighed and climbed into the hole. She hissed through her teeth.

“Cold!” she said as she lowered herself into the sea’s icy embrace.

She held her breath and ducked her head beneath the water’s surface.

“You next,” Bryan said to Zoe.

Zoe gasped at the cold water. Bryan followed, taking a deep gulping breath. He was embraced on every side by the cold darkness of the sea. Looking up, he saw The Revenge’s underside passing overhead. He couldn’t make out Zoe nor Cassie. He had to hope they were kicking their way up to the surface.

# 34

BOATSWAIN (pronounced with a cheeky inflection) couldn’t stand guard duty. It was so boring. Nothing interesting ever happened. That was the problem with serving on the biggest, most powerful ship in the British fleet. There was no other ship to challenge you.

It was Boatswain’s duty to just stand there and wait for the next sailor to come. Dull, dull, dull. But there was a rumor there were a couple of ladies among the prisoners, so at least he would have something nice to look at for a change.

Boatswain pushed at the prisoners’ door. It was stiff and opened just a couple of inches, causing the sailor to headbutt the door. Boatswain rubbed his head. A lump was going to form for sure.

No doubt First Mate was standing in front of it. He would give it a hard push to dislodge him and teach him a lesson. He took two steps back and shunted the door with his shoulder. The obstruction gave way.

When Boatswain rounded the door to look First Mate in the eye, he was surprised to find no one to meet his triumphant grin.

He looked down. First Mate’s body lay crumpled on the floor, a dirty rag in his mouth, his face red from anger, a red mark on his forehead from where the door had struck him forcefully.

*Oh no*, Boatswain thought. On second thought, he much preferred a boring shift. There was no chance of punishment.

His day had only just begun, and it was shaping up to be the worst he’d ever had.

# 35

BRYAN, ZOE AND CASSIE crawled from the sea on weak shaking limbs, falling flat on their faces. The Revenge was peeling away from shore and heading out to sea.

*Good riddance*, Zoe thought.

After ten minutes of rest, and near catatonic sleep, the figures began to stir, pushing themselves up onto their feet.

“What time is it?” Zoe said.

Bryan turned to look in the direction of the docklands. A tall clock tower stood proudly in the center of the town square.

“Two o’clock,” Bryan said. “If we hurry we can still make it.”

“What difference does it make?” Cassie said. “You told Cartographer’s son everything we’re going to do, where we’ll be. They’ll find us at Hollow Cove.”

“That’s the plan,” Bryan said.

“Are you crazy?” Zoe said. “They’ll come and tear us to pieces.”

“Yes,” Bryan said. “They’ll go to Hollow Cove. But they won’t just find us there. Stoneheart and his crew will be there too. And who do you think Admiral will most want to destroy? An innocent family? Or the pirate legend Stoneheart and his crew aboard the Mary Celeste? We need a diversion, and if we’re lucky, it might be provided by the British navy.”

“What if the British arrive too early?” Zoe said. “Or too late?”

“You say it like we had lots of other options,” Bryan said. “It’s all or nothing from here on out. Either we all get out of this, or we all perish at the hands of the pirates, or the British navy. But at least this way we have a chance.”

Zoe inflated her cheeks and let out a deep puff of air.

“This is so dangerous,” she said. “If it works, you might well be a total genius.”

“Or a complete fool if it doesn’t work,” Cassie said.

“I know what my money’s on,” Zoe said.

“Mine too,” Cassie said.

“Then you both lose,” Bryan said. “There’s no need to pick and choose. The answer is both.”

“But how are we going to get to Hollow Cove now?” Zoe said. “Time’s almost up and we have no boat!”

“Wheeee!” a small boy said. “Faster faster!”

He was riding a horse on the beachfront and having a whale of a time. Beside him were two more boys. The two older boys rode full size horses. The youngest lad rode an ass.

“Dibs on a horse,” Cassie said.

“You can have it,” Bryan said. “The slower I go on horseback, the happier I’ll be.”

# 36

“THEY APPEAR to have escaped through the maintenance hatches,” First Mate said, massaging his wrists.

How the family had managed to get the drop on First Mate while they were tied up was a mystery to Admiral. Why didn’t they kill First Mate? It was what Admiral would have done. They would have known First Mate would be discovered, and removing him would have given them a little more time to escape. He reminded himself they were civilians, and killing did not come easy.

“Did they get inside the crate?” Admiral said.

“No sir,” First Mate said. “The crate is firmly shut.”

“Good,” Admiral said.

So long as the crate’s contents remained a secret there was little to worry about.

“Do we know where the family went?” Admiral said.

“Yes,” First Mate said. “They mentioned something about Hollow Cove. They’re going to meet a pirate there.”

“Which pirate?” Admiral said.

“Stoneheart,” First Mate said. “And his crew aboard the Mary Celeste.”

Admiral’s eyes flickered up at First Mate and then away. The Mary Celeste wouldn’t be the first pirate ship he’d destroy using his contraption—he’d blown three other pirate ships from the water before now. There was no gunpowder storage error made by the pirates. It had been him all along. But destroying the Mary Celeste and its cretinous crew would prove the perfect opening salvo to his reign of fiery death on the rest of the sea rats.

“Plot a course for Hollow Cove,” Admiral said.

He knew the family were involved with the pirates somehow, but even he couldn’t have imagined they would have links to Stoneheart himself.

He would destroy the family—they would have been sentenced to death in any case—and were doing him the great favor of leading him to Stoneheart into the bargain.

Admiral had waited a long time for this moment, and now it was finally here.

# 37

PEG LEG picked the anchor up and tossed it over the side. It sank to the shallow depths of Hollow Cove, visible even from the deck of the Mary Celeste. It was a beautiful spot of pale blue water and white sandy beaches, not that many people ever came here.

Hollow Cove was famous for another reason: its bloody tale of the infamous pirate Stoneheart, who once used the spot to slay the former pirate lord council. It had been their intent to kill him, but Stoneheart had turned the tables and had them destroyed instead. It was a story old as time, one of many such Stoneheart legends.

Stoneheart slid a finger between his neck and collar and pulled at it to relieve his discomfort. How the Brits could fight in such a getup, he didn't know. His men clearly felt the same. They looked about as comfortable as a gorilla in a dress. Frankly, gorillas would have looked better.

The Union Jack snapped in the wind, beckoning from Mary Celeste's mast. Stoneheart appraised the sun and estimated the time to be almost four in the afternoon. Using the sun as a timepiece was more reliable than anything man could design because it never malfunctioned or needed upkeep.

Aaron stood at the bow of the Celeste, hands clutching the handrail, eyes fixed firmly on the cove's narrow opening. Jim stood beside him.

The sun sank a little lower in the sky. The world was winding down. It was 4.00pm. The family's time was up.

Stoneheart was a murderer, a pillager and a harbinger of doom, but one thing he most certainly was not was a man who broke his word.

"Time's up, Aaron," Stoneheart said. "Looks like your parents don't care for you as much as you thought after all."

"They'll be here," Aaron said, not removing his eyes from the cove's open entrance.

Stoneheart moved up behind Aaron and placed his hands on his shoulders.

"I'm a man of my word," he said. "I think you know what that means. I'm going to have to fulfill my side of the agreement."

Stoneheart reached into his pocket and pulled out a knife. It was blunt. It would be hard work to hack through the tough tendons in a human neck, even one as young as Aaron's.

"All we have in life is our reputation," Stoneheart said. "So I hope you understand that when I do this, I do it for something greater than just us."

He placed the knife to Aaron's throat. The metal was cold, but Aaron's mood was colder still. Aaron shut his eyes and a tear ran down his cheek.

Jim had been right. And Smithy. All of them. He had been forgotten by his parents. Maybe they failed to find the map, or simply failed to get back in time. It was all the same to Aaron now.

Jim stepped forward and opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted by a shout that came from the crow's nest.

Stoneheart looked up to see a trio of people on horseback round the long cove bend. They pulled up sharp and climbed down. They moved to the edge of the cove, waving their arms.

Aaron beamed. At a glance he could tell it was his family. He waved his arms to get their attention. The blade was still at his throat, but he seemed unaware of it. Stoneheart removed it, putting it back in his pocket.

"Well, well," Stoneheart said. "It appears they came for you after all."

He turned to Jim.

"Deploy a ship's boat to welcome our guests," he said.

Jim chose four men: two to work the ropes, two to row to the coast. It took ten minutes before the family were scaling the ladder up to the deck.

"Aaron!" Zoe said, the first to appear on deck. "Aaron!"

She had tears in her eyes and ran forward to hug him, but Stoneheart was quick to stand between them.

"Nice to see you again," Stoneheart said. "I trust you're well."

The family looked worn and tired, like they'd been through the wringer. But now here they were. They were tougher than Stoneheart gave them credit.

"Are you all right?" Zoe said to Aaron. "Have they been treating you well?"

"He's fine," Stoneheart said. "Treated like a prince."

"We have the map," Bryan said, appearing beside Zoe.

"And I have your boy," Stoneheart said.

"Aaron, come here baby," Zoe said, reaching for him.

Aaron stepped forward, but Stoneheart held him with a hand around the back of his neck, pinning him in place. Tears spilled down Aaron's cheeks. Stoneheart ruffled his hair.

"This little scamp has enjoyed every moment he's spent with us," he said. "Haven't you, Aaron?"

Aaron nodded, but there wasn't much mirth on his face.

"You see?" Stoneheart said.

"Give him to us, and we'll give you the map," Zoe said.

"You'll give me the map, and then you'll get Aaron," Stoneheart said. "My ship, my rules I'm afraid. Business before pleasure."

Bryan crossed the short space between them and held the map out. Stoneheart didn't take it, and seemed somewhat bemused by the prospect. Finally, he took the map.

"At last!" Stoneheart said.

He removed his hand from Aaron's neck. Aaron sprinted forward, running into his mother's arms.

Stoneheart got to his hands and knees and spread the British map on the deck. Jim took the second half of the map out—the pirate half—and put the two maps together. They matched up well as there was a wide stretch of blue sea that separated the two landmasses.

Stoneheart ran his fingers over the British map and began to memorize every line, mountain, hill and contour.

"And where on this map is the treasure meant to be located?" Stoneheart said.

"In the Misty Mountains," Bryan said. "In the valley between the two largest mountains."

"The Misty Mountains," Stoneheart said. "I've never heard of them."

"There's a good reason for that," Bryan said. "It's because the British didn't want you to know about them."

Stoneheart smiled.

"Yes," he said. "Of course. Though I've never known the British to be so successful at hiding something like this before."

"There has to be a first time for everything," Bryan said.

"Yes," Stoneheart said, that same icy smile fixed to his lips. "Lucky for them it happened to be this time though, don't you think? Beggars belief."

"Unless they were determined to make sure it worked out the way he has," Bryan said. "Anything is possible if you try hard enough."

“Perhaps,” Stoneheart said. “Though I’ve been attempting to discover the location of the treasure for quite some time, and I never managed to achieve it.”

“Till today,” Bryan said.

“Quite,” Stoneheart said.

The family edged across the deck toward the waiting ship’s boat.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Stoneheart said without looking up.

“We’re done,” Bryan said. “You have the map, we have Aaron. There’s nothing more to discuss.”

“Would you care to check to make sure Aaron is the same Aaron you left behind?” Stoneheart said.

Bryan frowned, looking first at Aaron, and then back at Stoneheart.

“I don’t understand what you mean,” he said.

“I mean, I fully intend on checking this map is genuine before letting you go off into the sunset,” Stoneheart said. “It’s just good business.”

“But the treasure is in the Misty Mountains,” Bryan said.

“It may be,” Stoneheart said. “Or it may not. So you see my quandary.”

The crew stepped between the family and ship’s boats stored on the deck.

“Of course,” Bryan said with a forced smile. “We will accompany you until the treasure is safely in your possession.”

“Good,” Stoneheart said. “Take them to the cells.”

“The cells?” Bryan said.

“I have no intention of letting you wander the ship as you did before,” Stoneheart said. “We’re not in the same situation as before. And you’re not the same people. You may attempt to escape again.”

“We won’t try to escape,” Bryan said. “We want-”

*BOOM!*

The sound was muffled with distance. The sharp crack bounced off the high cliff walls at their backs.

“Get down!” Jim shouted.

Before the crew could react, a cannonball fell into the sea a dozen yards short of the Mary Celeste’s prow. A column of water rose and fell across the ship’s deck. Stoneheart shot a look over his shoulder to see it was The Revenge that had sent the volley. The crew were quick to scatter, taking their positions.

It was the opportunity the family were waiting for.

If they were quick, they could escape aboard a ship's boat and cut ahead of The Revenge and into the open sea before either the pirates or the British could catch them. Bryan was certain the British would rather get the fabulous prize of the infamous Mary Celeste than a single small ship's boat of a harmless family.

And then something very strange happened.

"Don't worry," Stoneheart said. "They wouldn't dare fire at us."

"But they are firing on us!" Jim said. "We have to fire back!"

"Belay that order," Stoneheart said to the crew.

"But sir!" Jim said.

"They will not strike us," Stoneheart said. "I am quite sure of it."

The Revenge began to turn, as if they were preparing to line themselves up to strike the smaller pirate ship with everything they had. The pirate crew ducked their heads beneath the bannister in preparation of their impending doom.

But the The Revenge continued to turn, peeling away. The pirates grinned at the British sailors as they parted ways. The pirates cheered, certain they had just avoided certain death.

"What just happened?" Zoe said.

"I have no idea," Bryan said.

The British had arrived. They were going to be the distraction the family needed to get away. Instead, they had fired a single warning shot and turned tail. There was no logic to it. What was going on?

# 38

“YOU ARE TO FIRE a single shot upon the Mary Celeste but no more,” Admiral said to First Mate. “You are not to strike her. Is that understood? You are to avoid any direct confrontation with her at all.”

“But sir, what if she attacks us?” First Mate said.

“Then make sure you do not get yourself into any such position,” Admiral said. “Am I being clear?”

“Yes sir,” First Mate said. “Perfectly clear.”

“Excellent,” Admiral said. “I’m going to my quarters, and I do not want to be disturbed—under any circumstances.”

“Yes sir,” First Mate said.

Admiral descended the stairs into the bowels of the ship. A contingent of sailors stopped, saluted, and then continued on up the stairs.

Once he was alone, Admiral turned from his quarters and headed deeper into the ship. He approached the sliding door at the end of the corridor and entered the same room the family had escaped through earlier.

He wondered how they knew to escape through these passages—there was no way a local from the kingdom would know how to work the locks and open the hatch, much less know what their purpose was in the first place.

They’d said they were from the surface. *Could it be possible?* Admiral shook his head. No. It was much more likely they were from the cowled man’s world, sent here to spy on him, watch him. Perhaps it was some kind of test.

Suddenly the shadows seemed darker, the world less bright, an enemy concealed in every corner, sent to destroy him. Admiral’s head pounded in his skull, hard and painful. He braced himself on the wall and shut his eyes, counting over and over from one to ten.

Occasionally he missed a number or said a word unrelated to his task, but slowly, eventually, painfully, he returned to normal. He took a few deep breaths, and the episode passed. They were getting worse. He wiped the cold sweat from his face and approached the back wall of the room.

He pulled on the levers and turned the knobs in the order specified in the instructions. Water began to flood the room, wetting Admiral’s shoes. He turned the locks on the crate door and climbed inside.

He took a seat inside his contraption and felt as powerful as God, capable of taking life. And that was precisely what he intended.

# 39

THE PIRATE PRISON cell made the one on The Revenge look like the Ritz. Placing a hand on any surface turned the palms black and greasy. One corner smelled strongly of urine. Something crunched beneath their shoes, what Bryan strongly suspected were bones. He hoped they weren't human.

"I'm sorry," Bryan said. "To you all. I thought we had everything going for us. I don't understand why the British turned tail like that. It just doesn't make sense."

"You have nothing to be sorry for," Zoe said. "There's something else at work here, something we don't know."

"But what?" Bryan said. "They fired a single shot and then took off. What could we possibly not know? Pirates and Brits. They're meant to be at war. Why wouldn't they fight one another?"

"I don't know," Zoe said. "But Stoneheart does. We're going to have to figure a way out of here if we want to survive this."

"We're locked in the cell of an active pirate ship full of men who want nothing more than to stab us," Bryan said. "Or worse. Stoneheart probably has a guard watching us right now. Even if we do escape, there will be no way we can get away."

"Then what happens when we get to the Misty Mountains?" Cassie said. "We're going to wait for them to find the treasure? What will we do in the meantime?"

"I know what his men will want to do when the sun goes down," Bryan said, running his hands over his face. It was the worst thing he could imagine. "Come here, Cassie."

Cassie came to him and they hugged. A father with his little girl. Zoe hugged Aaron close too, kissing him on the forehead.

"Are you okay?" Zoe said.

"I'm fine," Aaron said.

"We were so worried about you," Zoe said.

"I thought you might not be able to find the treasure and I was going to be stuck with the pirates," Aaron said.

“We were always going to come to you,” Zoe said. “Do you hear me? We would never leave you behind. We would never leave you to your fate like that.”

Aaron gave his mother a small smile.

“It might not have turned out so bad if you didn’t come back,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Zoe said.

“Do you remember Larson, the fishing boat captain Stoneheart killed?” Aaron said.

“We don’t have to talk about that now,” Zoe said.

“No, it’s not bad,” Aaron said. “The other day I was helping Jim with getting some food from the pantry and I saw him.”

“Saw who?” Zoe said.

“Larson,” Aaron said. “The old fisherman.”

Zoe frowned.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“Neither did I at first,” Aaron said. “But I think Stoneheart didn’t really kill him, only knocked him out, using some kind of blank in his pistol.”

“Why would Stoneheart do something like that?” Zoe said.

“Because what if Stoneheart isn’t as bad as we think?” Aaron said. “What if it’s all an act? What if he only pretends to do these things to make people think he’s bad?”

“If he was good, why would he lock us up like this?” Bryan said. “He should let us go.”

“Maybe he will,” Aaron said.

“We can’t rely on a pirate to do the right thing,” Bryan said, shaking his head. “You might be right, Aaron. But we need to get out of here as soon as we can.”

“Don’t worry,” Zoe said. “We’ll figure a way out of here. You just wait and see. An opportunity will present itself and we’ll take advantage of it. All we need to do is keep our eyes and ears open. It might be small, subtle. We need to have our brains in gear.”

*KA-BOOM!*

It wasn’t small, and it wasn’t subtle, but it was certainly an opportunity.

# 40

“THE BRITISH!” Skinny said, picking himself up off the deck. “They’re firing on us!”

“No,” Stoneheart said. “They wouldn’t. They wouldn’t dare.”

Stoneheart was the only member of the crew who had not taken refuge and found cover.

“Look,” Jim said. “The Revenge is too far to be able to hit us with their guns.”

Jim was right. They were well out of range. Then what in blazes had hit them? Stoneheart scoured the sky, but found no sign of any projectile.

“The Gods,” Skinny said. “We’re cursed! I knew we should never have let the women come back on board! There’s only one thing worse than having a woman on board, and that’s letting two come back after we were rid of them!”

“There’s no curse,” Stoneheart said. “We must have run aground, that’s all.”

“Run aground?” Skinny said, spine strengthened by fear. “We’re in the middle of the ocean! There aren’t any rocks out here!”

“Rocks are everywhere, you fool!” Stoneheart said. “Jim, get us out of here.”

“Out of where, sir?” Jim said.

It was a valid question. There was nothing to run away from, nothing that showed any obvious sign of being dangerous. Everywhere around them was the same view. Endless ocean.

“Cap’n, we’re taking on water,” Peg Leg said.

“Where?” Stoneheart said.

“Within the hull,” a pirate said. “The blast blew a hole in our side.”

The crew ran to the side and peered over, down at the cavernous hole. The sea lapped against it, filling it inch by inch. It would be a slow death.

“The hull?” Jim said, turning white. “Aaron’s in there.”

“He’s the least of our worries right now,” Smithy said. “We have to evacuate.”

“We’re not going anywhere!” Stoneheart said. “Nothing claims the Celeste, least of all something we can’t see.”

“But sir…” Smithy said.

Stoneheart brought his arm around so fast Smithy didn’t even see it coming. The blow lifted Smithy off his feet.

“Grow back your spine, you lily-livered scrote!” Stoneheart said. “Get the men to their battle stations. Whether it’s beast or boat, we will stay and fight!”

# 41

AARON GASPED and spewed out a mouthful of salty water. He gasped, breathing in, before sinking beneath the surface. He splashed with his arms, righting himself.

Something struck his head. He pushed it aside. His calf hurt, stinging. He repositioned his feet and found he could barely touch the floor, only with the very tips of his toes.

He had blacked out the moment the explosion occurred. There was a lot of sensory input to process. The shattering cry rent the ship's hull open, exposing the afternoon sunlight. The Mary Celeste groaned at her mortal wound.

Aaron turned to find Cassie floundering, peering through soggy strands of her hair that covered her face. She locked eyes on Aaron and began to swim over to him.

Zoe hung over the edge of the hole that had been blasted in the ship. She lay on her front, her torso over the side. Aaron swam toward her, grabbed her, and pulled her back. Fear made his heart race. She was like a doll in his arms, her body floppy as if devoid of life.

Aaron pulled her back, her head smacking the water. The movement must have dislodged something, because it wasn't a second later that Zoe was coughing up her own mouthful of salty water. The water had turned a faint pink from the cut she had on her forehead.

"Mum?" Aaron said. "Mum? Are you all right?"

"Give her some space," Cassie said.

Aaron moved aside, holding his mother in his arms, helping ensure she stayed afloat.

"Help!" a voice said, cut short by burbling water.

Cassie turned to find Bryan to the side, water up to his chin. More was spilling in, the ocean squeezing itself into the tiny prison. Bryan tilted his head up toward the ceiling to make the most of the air he had.

"Swim!" Cassie said.

"I can't!" Bryan said. "Leg. Trapped."

It was all he could manage before the water level grasped for his mouth. Bryan gulped a mouthful of oxygen and sank beneath the surface.

Zoe, still struggling for air, was on her feet now. She pointed to Bryan and pushed Aaron away. It was a gentle push, all she was capable of.

“Will you be all right?” Aaron said.

Zoe nodded, though her face was deathly pale. Aaron swam to join Cassie, who came up from having been under water. She wiped at her eyes to clear her vision.

“There’s something on his leg, pinning him down,” Cassie said. “I need help lifting it.”

Aaron peered around, looking for something he might be able to give to Bryan to breathe through, like a pipe or reed, but there was nothing. They needed to hurry. Bryan wouldn’t last longer than a couple of minutes beneath the surface.

“Let’s do it,” Aaron said.

He and Cassie took a deep breath and went under. The water was murky. Aaron felt Cassie’s hand take him by the wrist and guide him to something angular with square corners. It also had grating, and he realized it was one of the prison doors.

Aaron planted his feet and crouched down, gripping the door with his hands. With no countdown, he added his own efforts to Cassie’s. He pulled, dragging at the doors, and together they managed to ease the door up one inch… Two inches…

They were making progress, but now Aaron was running out of oxygen too. He doubted Bryan could last the time it would take for him to refill his lungs. He gritted his teeth and a trio of bubbles belched from his lips.

He set his feet again and lifted with every muscle fiber he had. He felt a disturbance in the water beside him. If he hadn’t known better, he would have said the prison door had become lighter. It raised by six inches.

Something struck him on the shoulder. He ignored it. Then someone gripped his shirt and pulled. He realized it was someone telling him to come back up to the surface.

Aaron let go and pushed with his legs, bursting through the surface. He gulped mouthfuls of sweet, delicious oxygen. He began to fall back, knowing he would rebound and sink beneath the surface. He flailed with his arms to stay upright. He needed more oxygen. He bobbed to and fro until he was centered, treading water.

“Are you okay?” Jim said.

“Yes,” Aaron said, panting for air. “I’m fine. How’s Bryan?”

“He’ll be all right,” Jim said. “Thanks to you and Cassie.”

Cassie had her arms wrapped around Bryan. He had his eyes closed, his own arms cradling his daughter’s elbows. He was alive and would survive. But they didn’t have time to dawdle.

The ship groaned as she began to tilt to one side, taking on water and flooding. She was going to sink.

“Over here!” Zoe said, waving to the fissure in the ship’s hull.

She was pointing to something below them. The ship’s boats had been knocked loose by the explosion and floated away from the sinking Celeste. The family would need to hurry or else the pirate crew would take all the ship’s boats and there would be nothing but floating ship debris for them to cling to. The nearest landmass was an intimidating distance away on the horizon.

“Wait,” Aaron said. “What’s that?”

It was an object immediately below the surface, the curve of the water revealing something like a sphere. And as fast as it had appeared, it disappeared, sinking to the depths.

Jim had turned pale.

“Let’s get out of here!” Cassie said.

Aaron wasn’t sure he wanted to jump into the sea right then, not with whatever it was he’s just seen beneath the surface. Cassie didn’t share his reservations and threw herself over the side, taking Bryan with her. Zoe jumped next.

“You go,” Aaron said to Jim.

“I can’t go,” Jim said. “I have to take care of the captain.”

“But who’ll take care of you?” Aaron said. “Come with us. You deserve somewhere better than this.”

Jim looked torn, looking from the fleeing family to the stairs that led back up to the deck. To the captain.

“I can’t,” Jim said. “I’m sorry.”

He offered his hand.

“Thank you,” he said. “For being my friend.”

Aaron considered the proffered hand. Then he took it. They shook.

“Without you, we would all be dead,” he said.

Jim smiled back. It was the first time Aaron had really seen him smile. It showed the carefree child Jim always had the potential of being, but never got to explore. Aaron made up his mind. He put his other hand over Jim's.

"It's about time I returned the favor," he said.

"What?" Jim said.

Aaron pulled on Jim's arm, bringing him to the very edge. He flailed his arms to maintain balance, but was already tilting over the side. He spun in the air, glaring at Aaron as he fell.

Aaron jumped and kicked his way up to the surface. He swam alongside Jim, toward the ship's boat the others had climbed into.

Bryan reached over the side and grabbed Aaron by the collar, pulling him into the ship. Under any other circumstances, Aaron would have protested he could do it himself, but after what he'd seen in the water, he couldn't have gotten out of the sea fast enough.

"Why did you do that?" Jim said to Aaron.

"Because sometimes we need someone to give us that little push," Aaron said.

Jim looked up at the sinking Mary Celeste, at the figures on her deck, the only family he had ever known.

Bryan seized the oars and began to row, ensuring he didn't put too much pressure on his injured leg. Zoe did likewise, and though their strokes were mistimed and not as efficient as they could have been, they pulled away from the sinking ship.

"What was that thing under the surface?" Cassie said.

"Some kind of monster," Aaron said.

"It's not a monster," Bryan said. "It's some kind of submersible."

"Submersible?" Zoe said. "You mean, like a submarine?"

"Yes," Bryan said. "A one-man submarine."

"I don't understand," Cassie said. "I didn't know they had submarines back then, in this time."

"They didn't," Bryan said. "At least, nothing as advanced as what we saw under the surface."

"But what is it doing here?" Zoe said.

"I would have thought that much was obvious," Bryan said. "It's here to sink the Mary Celeste."

# 42

IT WAS ALMOST comically easy. It was the future of warfare—the real future—and if Admiral had a little music to listen to, he would have been totally at ease. He was now a discrete distance from the hull of the Mary Celeste, invisible to everyone aboard and able to attack at will. It was a huge advantage.

A pair of white feathers splashed from a pair of oars as a small ship's boat was propelled out to sea. Whoever they were, they were smart to get away so quickly. Soon, there wouldn't even be much of a ship remaining.

Admiral operated the vehicle via two levers. One lever was responsible for turning left and right on its X-axis, the other, up and down on its Y-axis. It had been complicated at first, but once Admiral got the hang of it, it was as easy as riding a horse.

Curious that the thrumming in the engine should also be called 'horsepower'. He had checked and found no sign of any horses at all. In fact, he couldn't think of a less conducive location to store horses.

The weapon system was of his own engineers' design, and it showed. It lacked any of the advanced designs of the ship—or pod, as the schematics insisted. It was a simple package of gunpowder with a timer attached to it, creating a spark. Admiral controlled these packages by attaching them to the limpet-encrusted undersides of enemy ships and retreating to a safe distance. It was not fancy, but served its purpose. Devastatingly so.

Some might have used the superior technology to dominate the waves, but Admiral wished to use it only to cleanse the ocean of pirate scum. And if the British couldn't do it in the full view of the public, then Admiral would do it from the shadows.

An investigation would prove none of The Revenge's cannons had been fired, save a warning shot across the Celeste's bow, and conclude the ship must have been destroyed by an onboard error, as it had been assumed with the other pirate ships.

Admiral knew better. It had been him and his little underwater pod that had sunk them.

Due to operating under the sea, the little pod could not run on wind power. It ran instead on black oil that was fed into the machine via pipes. The pod could then propel itself forward, controlled by a pedal in the floor.

It was a marvel of engineering, engineering not of this world, of that Admiral was quite certain. And because it wasn't of this world, it was devastatingly effective.

He pressed the pedal down, and the pod zipped forward. He had one more explosive package left. It would be enough to sink the Mary Celeste and Stoneheart's legend once and for all.

# 43

“THERE’S SOMETHING in the water!” Skinny said. “Look!”

The crew followed his shaking finger to the rounded shape illuminated by a bright light under the surface. The crew crossed themselves, eyes boggling.

“It’s a monster!” Smithy said.

“It’s the kraken!” Skinny said. “I saw his tentacles! I saw its giant arms! It’ll kill us all!”

“Sir, we must abandon the Celeste,” Smithy said to the captain.

“Prepare the cannons!” Stoneheart said. “Aim at the creature and fire.”

“But sir-” Smithy said.

“Are you refusing to follow orders?” Stoneheart said, sliding his knife from the scabbard at his waist.

Smithy gritted his teeth.

“No, sir,” he said. “Of course not.”

Stoneheart turned to the rest of the crew.

“Yes, there might be a monster coming to claim us, but we won’t go down without a fight!” he said. “Men at arms!”

The men moved with uncharacteristic hesitation, wary and cautious. They spilled the gunpowder on the deck and dropped heavy cannonballs. They loaded the cannons and angled them down, aiming directly at the glowing monster below.

“Ready on your orders, Captain,” Smithy said.

“Fire,” Stoneheart said.

“Fire!” Smithy bellowed.

The cacophonous explosions filled the air, rattling off, sending up puffs of thick black smoke. The balls struck the water, but didn’t pierce deeply. Some only skimmed the surface like a tossed stone.

The men loaded the cannons again and fired. Most of the shots missed, a couple seeming to strike the monster deadon. They didn’t seem to have much effect, and the monster kept coming.

The air grew thick with smoke, until the pirates couldn’t even see what they were aiming at.

“Cease firing,” Stoneheart said.

“Cease firing!” Smithy said.

The smoke dissipated. The pirates were silent as they appraised the water’s surface.

“It’s gone,” Skinny said. “It’s gone! I think we hit it! It’s dead! Woohoo!”

He danced a merry jig on the deck.

“If that’s true, where’s the blood?” Peg Leg said.

“There!” Skinny said.

He pointed to a patch of black that spread thickly across the surface.

“Black blood?” Peg Leg said, turning pale.

The pirates crossed themselves again.

“It’s a monster,” Skinny said. “Why would it have blood like a man?”

The Mary Celeste groaned and shifted in the water as if trying to find a better position. The crew clung to the mast and hand railing as she tilted over. The water was flooding the ship. She leaned dangerously to one side.

“She’s going to roll over, Captain,” Smithy said. “We have to evacuate.”

Stoneheart pressed his lips together.

“Very well,” he said. “Evacuate.”

Relieved, Smithy issued the orders.

Stoneheart adjusted his clothing and kissed his fingers. He pressed them gently to the Celeste’s main mast. He smiled in thanks to her, to everything she had done for him, for his crew. But now they must part. Like all partings, it was painful. She’d been with him every step of the way, present during every adventure. She had never let him down.

His crew jumped from the Celeste and climbed into the ship’s boats that had been knocked loose. Other crewmembers were working to release the other boats from the deck.

But there was one ship’s boat, farther away than the others, that was already rowing to safety. Bile rose in the back of Stoneheart’s throat, threatening to make him retch with fury.

*Those yellow livered cowards*, he thought. *They’ll pay for fleeing the Celeste before I gave the order*.

And then he noticed the color of the cowards’ clothes. It was the family.

“Where’s Jim?” Stoneheart said to Smithy, realizing he hadn’t seen him in some time.

“He went below,” Smithy said. “To aid the prisoners.”

Stoneheart thought back to the Celeste rolling over, playing dead. The cargo holds would be flooded. Jim was a strong swimmer and wouldn’t have lost his life so easily.

And then he noticed the family had gained a new member as they fled. Jim stood on the stern of the ship’s boat. Stoneheart would have recognized him anywhere. Jim had abandoned the Celeste, had abandoned Stoneheart, but Stoneheart would not abandon him.

A sailor was lost without a set course. And Stoneheart had just set his.

# 44

NOXIOUS FUMES filled the little pod, making Admiral gag. He realized then the danger of using a machine that attacked from beneath the sea. There was little to keep the surrounding water from spilling in through the spidery cracks in the windscreen.

When Admiral had seen the cannonballs striking the water's surface, he had laughed, believing himself invincible. He wanted the pirates to try and stop him, knowing they couldn't prevent their own deaths.

Then one of the cannonballs struck the hard glass. There had been a sickening crunch. Admiral had not only heard it, but felt it in the pit of his stomach. The feeling of loss.

The cannonball had lodged itself in the glass, temporarily blocking the hole and keeping seepage small. Red lights flashed on the control panel. Admiral didn't know what they meant, but it couldn't have been good.

He peeled away from the surface and into the depths, cursing himself for being so foolhardy. Even the greatest weapons had their weaknesses. He needed to head back to The Revenge, to call upon Chief Engineer to patch it up so he could finish off the Mary Celeste.

He tapped on the oil indicator. It was showing the engine was half empty. Admiral frowned. It should have been more than two thirds full. He must have a leak.

Then he saw feathery shapes above him, half a dozen rhythmic pulses heading away from the stricken Celeste. A smile lit Admiral's face.

The Mary Celeste was a lost cause. It was the only reason Stoneheart and his crew would abandon her. Now they had come to him so he might finish his job. That was nice of them.

Admiral turned the wheels and began to ascend toward them. The pod could last long enough to wipe out the crew. Happy days.

# 45

THE MONSTER'S black blood covered a large swathe of the water's surface. The men wanted to go around it, but to do so would have taken too long. Stoneheart ordered them to go through it.

The men were silent, looking directly ahead, unable to prevent themselves from peering down at the spillage that caked their hulls.

Stoneheart leaned over the side and put his finger in the water. It came out black. His crew stared with bulging eyes. Stoneheart sniffed the blood and then pressed his thumb to it, feeling the texture.

"Oil," Stoneheart said. "It's oil. Not blood."

"Some kraken are known to have ink black as night," Skinny said. "Sucks your soul from you if you touch it, so they say."

Stoneheart slid a finger across Skinny's face, leaving a smear. Skinny dropped his oar and screamed like a child waking from a nightmare. He rubbed at his face with his shirt, and then took the shirt off and threw it over the side.

Stoneheart roared with laughter.

"Get back to rowing," he said. "Or you'll be bathing in it."

Skinny didn't need more motivation. He dropped into his seat and rowed hard.

The family ship's boat was just a couple hundred yards ahead. Their headstart wouldn't save them. Stoneheart's crew were tough, used to the oar, their technique practiced. They would catch up in no time.

# 46

THE JOURNEY might have been pleasant if the pirates weren't hot on their tail. The land was coming up nicely, and the family would be on it soon, but the pirates were catching up—their movements were well-timed, their technique perfect. The family's head start was beginning to wane. There was no way they were going to stay ahead. At this rate, they might arrive at the island the same time as the pirates.

"Wait a minute," Aaron said.

"What… is… it?" Bryan said between each pull on the oars.

"The island…" Aaron said. "It's… No, it can't be."

"What?" Zoe said, her face flush with exertion.

"It's the same one we first arrived at!" Aaron said. "The one with the fog! Look! There's where we made our fire! And there, where we headed into the forest for food! And the tree we dragged onto the beach! It's the same one!"

"Aaron's right," Cassie said. "It's the same."

It was enough to give Bryan and Zoe pause for thought, but they didn't stop to turn and look back. They were fully committed now.

"Then we know the area," Bryan said. "There is another island beside it. We might be able to hide behind it. Zoe, veer right."

They pulled harder with their left hands, veering right.

"We're not going to get there," Cassie said, her voice distant with fear.

"Of course we are," Bryan said. "We don't have much farther to go."

Cassie raised a finger, pointing behind them. Bryan and Zoe glanced over their shoulders. They paused, double took, and then froze. They dropped their oars.

"It's the fog," Cassie said. "It's getting dark, and the fog is coming. And you know what the fog brings with it…"

The fog came from behind, and submerged the pirates first, losing them to view.

"Monsters aren't real," Bryan said.

"You heard them that night," Cassie said. "We all did."

“Cassie’s right,” Jim said. “There are things in this world that are a mystery to us. Demons in the deep dark. They are not to be underestimated.”

“Row,” Bryan said to Zoe. “If we’re lucky, we might get to the island before anything can catch us. Row.”

And then the screams began.

# 47

THE SHROUD of fog came with the darkness as the warmth of the sunlight left them. Within moments the fog was thick, and Stoneheart could no longer make out his men in the other boats.

“Keep moving forward!” Stoneheart bellowed.

The swish of oars was soft, but was carried with the moisture in the air.

Smithy dropped his oar and leaped back, crawling into a crevice in the stern of the ship’s boat.

“What’s wrong with you?” Skinny said.

“That’s a long list,” Earl said.

“Something gripped my oar!” Smithy said. “I swear! Something grabbed it!”

Skinny crossed himself and clutched the crucifix beneath his shirt with both hands. His lips moved in a prayer Stoneheart was surprised he knew.

“Get up!” Stoneheart said. “Get back to your oar you scum-sucking lily-livered dog!”

Smithy gibbered, casting frantic glances at the other men. They were all afraid, but they didn’t back him up. Smithy got to his feet and retook his seat.

“The real monster is in here,” Stoneheart said, jabbing a thumb at his chest. “We destroyed the monster. We killed it. We, the crew of the Mary Celeste, laid to rest what no other man has even attempted before. Now, row!”

There was a roar of voices behind them, hidden by the curtain of fog. A loud rending of wood, and a thunderous rush of water.

Stoneheart and his crew were silent. The sea joined them in their silent wide-eyed vigil.

A piece of wood floated toward them. Smithy bent over the side to pick it up. He showed it to the others. It belonged to the prow of a ship’s boat. He gently placed it back in the water as if making a tribute.

“Help me!” a voice called out.

It was Peg Leg, floundering in the water, swimming toward them. He was making slow, pained progress.

“Help!” he repeated.

But none of Stoneheart’s men lifted a finger.

“We should get him aboard,” Smithy said, his voice lacking conviction.

“He’ll attract the beast to us,” Skinny said.

Peg Leg sank beneath the surface, and then came back up again. He wasn’t going to make it.

Stoneheart took hold of Smithy’s oar and held it over the side for Peg Leg to grip. Peg Leg reached for it, but swallowed a mouthful of water. He tried again, and his hand slipped weakly off the smooth wood of the oar.

“Grab it, you son of a limp jackrabbit!” Stoneheart said.

Peg Leg did, pinching the wood between his thumb and fingers. Stoneheart pulled at the oar, dragging the man toward their ship’s boat. Peg Leg grabbed the side.

“What happened?” Stoneheart said.

“A beast,” Peg Leg said. “It came from the depths and dragged us down, down, down. I saw its flashing teeth, its gaping jaws. I was able to slip between its tentacles and kick my way to the surface. Please, get me out of the water. I’ll never enter the water again as long as I live, I swear.”

Stoneheart took hold of the man, pulling on his arms. Peg Leg was half in the boat when Stoneheart felt a slight tug. Peg Leg felt it too. He looked up into Stoneheart’s eyes, fear growing.

“No…” Peg Leg said.

His scream was muffled by water as he was yanked back, into the sea. Stoneheart let Peg Leg go only at the last moment, almost falling over the side into the water himself. Bubbles rumbled up, Peg Leg’s last breath snuffed out.

More shouts, closer this time, still concealed by the mask of fog. Flashes of light popped into existence from pistol fire. Fireworks in a dream.

“No!” a voice screamed. “It’s got me! It’s got me!”

The man’s screams came to a sticky blood curdling end.

“Row!” Stoneheart ordered his men.

“But the men-” Smithy said, his voice haunted and hollow.

“They’re already dead,” Stoneheart said. “Row!”

The crew did, doing their best to block out the screams of their fellow crewmembers.

# 48

THE WATER slapped the ship's boat's hull. To anyone unacquainted with such things, it may not have sounded out of the ordinary. But a pirate listened to that sound day-in and day-out. Why it should sound unnatural, Stoneheart couldn't say. But every fiber of his being was screaming in fear.

"Stop," Stoneheart said.

The men did, pulling their oars up to hover over the water's surface. They were encased in fog on all sides. There was no escaping it, no way to know if they were heading in the right direction, even. The fog was like smoke and constricted Stoneheart's throat, making him choke.

"How are we going to get out of here if we don't row?" Smithy whispered.

Stoneheart placed his finger to his lips for silence. He kept his eyes on the water. They would wait all night if they had to, for the fog to clear. They needed a distraction, something for the beast to focus on while they made their escape. But they had nothing aboard. And then Stoneheart looked up.

There was something on board. His men were unlikely to willingly sacrifice themselves to save their crewmates, but one man versus three was not much of a challenge. Especially if that one man was Skinny.

But Skinny was in luck.

The oars of another ship's boat pushed through the water. The noise seemed loud in the silence.

"We should warn them to stop rowing," Smithy said, rising to his feet.

Stoneheart put his finger to his lips and shook his head for emphasis. Smithy sat back down. The other ship's boat was making good progress, scything through the water. With just a little more time they may have been able to reach the island, make it to safety.

But it wasn't to be.

A rush of water, like something moving rapidly across the surface, steamed toward the noise of the oars of the other ship's boat. They were

not visible, and that was just as well. The men’s screams were enough to paint a picture.

Stoneheart nodded, and the rowers picked up their oars again. They rowed carefully at first, and then picked up speed as the munching of the feeding frenzy died away.

# 49

ADMIRAL FLOATED in a sea of darkness. There was little to guide him, no stars or moss growing on the polestar side of trees. He was alone, a halo of light in an eternal darkness, with only the gentle hum of his pod to keep him company. It was quiet. Too quiet.

He'd lost track of the ship's boats some time ago, and though he was loathe to, he knew he would have to surface to see where they were. He couldn't wait much longer for fear they might be getting close to the island already.

He turned the handles in his little pod and caught sight of something out the corner of his eye.

His muscles immediately felt weak.

What he'd seen was a slimy skin-like flesh, dark, and yet it reflected what little moonlight filtered through the thick fog above. But it hadn't seen him yet. At least, he hoped it hadn't.

Admiral turned the lights off and sat in darkness, his breaths loud in his ears. If he was silent, perhaps the monster wouldn't see him. And so he waited.

The pod jerked to one side. Something had seized it, wrapping around the weak front windscreen.

Admiral turned on the lights and engine. He hit the pedal in the floor to zip away, but he didn't move anywhere. He turned the pod around, its harsh bright light catching circular rows of pointed teeth. Something was caught between them. Admiral retched when he recognized them as human limbs.

So, the stories were true. The superstitious sailors and pirates had been correct. There was a monster. And Admiral was its next meal.

The monster flexed its rubber-like body, a movement both alien and yet fluid, beautiful. Worse, it was powerful, and seized the pod in its jaws. It shook the pod side to side.

Admiral bounced off the walls like a rag doll. The metal cage was tough and wouldn't break so easily. But something snapped, and the cracks grew

wider in the front window. The water rushed in, filling the tiny compartment.

Admiral fell back in his seat. He wouldn't let himself be so easily defeated. He reached behind his chair and took out his remaining explosive.

The metal was bending and crunching beneath the monster's powerful jaws, crushing the pod around him. Admiral repositioned and levered himself up, curling his legs and kicking at the glass pane. He struck it again and again. It crunched and snapped, but would not give away. Then the monster, somehow, impossibly, bit harder, and the glass shattered.

Admiral shoved a timer into the explosive and let it fall to the floor of the pod.

*Eat this!* Admiral thought. *Careful, it might give you heartburn!*

Admiral pushed himself out of the pod and pulled himself through the water. Something struck him on the back, knocking him forward. He lost an all-important bubble of air. He kicked toward the surface. He could see it shimmering, the moonlight playing across its surface.

Something wrapped around his ankle.

*No!* Admiral screamed in his mind. *No, no, no!*

He struggled against the monster's tendril, kicking and flailing, grasping toward the water's surface, using what little oxygen he had to attempt an escape. If he could just stretch a little farther he could gasp a mouthful of oxygen. It was so close! But he couldn't. The tendril was so strong.

It pulled him deeper, into the darkness. Admiral could see with terrifying clarity the bumps on the monster's arm, thick and powerful, wrapping around him, its suckers pressing at Admiral's face as it squeezed him tighter and tighter, forcing the air from his lungs.

Admiral counted down the seconds to the explosion. It should have gone off by now. Had it malfunctioned? Was the timer broken?

A sense of calm came over Admiral, resigned to his fate. He was doomed, but he did not have to enter it with fear and anger. He actually felt ready for this.

He was ready to die.

An incredible burst of light emanated from below. A great groan of agony issued from the giant beast, and a powerful pulse pushed Admiral

back, up to the surface. He was quick to fill his lungs, filling himself with sweet life, thanking his lucky stars for still being alive.

And then he began to sink.

The tendril wrapped about him lost its power and hung from a severed end, but it was heavy, and dragged Admiral down, down, down.

Admiral struggled with newfound courage. His arms found some give, and he used his shoulders like an escape artist to find enough space. He kicked and felt the monster’s giant suckers pull disgustingly at his skin. He forced the tentacle loose.

He rose toward the surface. He was running low on oxygen again, on vapors. There was no way he was going to make it. Or could he?

# 50

BRYAN AND ZOE felt the explosion rattle through their oars. The water rushed, like a waterfall. The family couldn't see the explosion, nor what the target had been, but it was too much to hope meaty pirate chunks were part of the material raining down on the sea.

The family pressed on, passing the island that had been their former prison, working their way around it to the adjacent island. Aaron and Cassie leapt from their ship's boat and ran as fast as they could, to put as much distance between themselves and the sea as they could.

"Wait!" Bryan said. "We'll need the ship's boat! Help me pull it in!"

It was with heavy feet that Aaron and Cassie walked back to the water's edge. Still, walking had never felt so good to Cassie. She could understand why some people, after experiencing a traumatic event, often got down on all fours and kissed the ground. She felt like doing it herself, but there was work to be done.

She helped the others drag the ship's boat into a small inlet, and draped leaves over it.

"It won't stay hidden for long," Bryan said. "But it might give us some time."

"Buy us time for what?" Cassie said.

"To protect ourselves," Bryan said. "These are pirates we're talking about. They're dangerous. And Stoneheart won't stop till he has had revenge on us."

"I'd like to say you were wrong," Jim said. "But, assuming he survived the explosion we heard earlier, he won't stop. Not until he gets what he wants."

"Why does he want us?" Cassie said. "We haven't even done anything to him!"

"That's not the way he sees it," Bryan said. "We outwitted him, escaped his clutches, and to a man such as him, that's too much to bear. Especially with his reputation to uphold."

"We should get dry first," Zoe said. "There's a cave here. We can get warm in there."

They gathered dry reeds and carried them into the cave. Bryan tried his lighter, but it was soaked and useless. He went outside and searched the rocky outcrop until he came across a pair of flint rocks. He smacked them together, producing sparks.

It took ten minutes before he managed to get anything to catch. He gently blew on it to help it alight. He added it to the main body of reeds, wood, and other flammable materials the others had gathered.

The family sat back and let the warmth take them. Though they were tired, they dared not sleep for fear of waking with pirates standing over them.

They sat fashioning weapons, sharpening sticks into sharp points. Cassie sat a stick to one side and picked up another. She paused and looked at the cave wall. There was a stick man figure drawn on it in blue, holding a bow and arrow. The light flickered and gave the impression he was moving.

Cassie moved toward the drawing, putting her fingers to it. The light flickered again, stirred by a light breeze from the entrance, and uncovered another painting. This one of a yak or wildebeest.

“Guys,” Cassie said. “I think there are cave paintings on this wall.”

“Cave paintings?” Bryan said. “Why would there be cave paintings here? No one lives here.”

“Now they don’t,” Zoe said. “But in the past they might have done.”

She snapped off a fingered branch and scooped some of the fire and its kindling onto it. She brought it around so the others could see the drawings. The wall was littered with them.

“What are these things?” Jim said. “I’ve never seen anything like them before.”

He pointed to a drawing of a long square box with people inside, running on a parallel set of lines. Tracks.

“They’re called trains,” Bryan said. “They’re used to carry people from one place to another.”

“What about this one?” Jim said.

This drawing was of a large room with a screen at the front, and people sat beneath a beam of light.

“That’s a cinema,” Aaron said. “People go there to watch movies.”

“Movies?” Jim said.

“Stories,” Aaron said. “But made to look real. Recorded using cameras… It’s hard to explain. One day you’ll get to see them, when we get back to the surface.”

Jim didn’t comment, and pressed his fingers to the drawings, to what his ancestors had wanted to pass on, to hand down to their children.

“It’s a recording,” Zoe said. “Of everything the people here came from, the kind of world they left behind. A modern world, to their eyes. I don’t understand. Why would they want to rebuild society like they have now and ignore everything from the modern world?”

“Because they had no choice,” Bryan said. “It’s much easier to rebuild a society from an earlier time than the modern world. You need so many more materials and complicated systems to operate.”

“And look here,” Zoe said. “They knew there was a monster in the water. Whoever stayed behind watched as the people left, managing to escape its clutches. And there’s something else here, a treasure of some kind.”

She put her hand to her mouth in shock.

“You don’t think the treasure is really here?” Bryan said.

“Could be,” Zoe said. “But why hasn’t anyone discovered it before now?”

“Because the only people who could come here, pirates, were the same people who refused to because of the monster,” Zoe said. “Cartographer was right. The treasure never was on the British side of the world. It was on the pirate side.”

“Are you telling me the treasure was under our noses this whole time?” Jim said.

“Yes,” Zoe said. “Only they would never find it because they refused to face the monster.”

Cassie peered closer at the drawing.

“Wait,” she said. “There’s something else here. A spiral with a key drawn above it. They wrote ‘HOME’ next to it. Do you think it could be the Passage?”

“Yes,” Bryan said. “This could be our way out of here. Maybe this was the treasure the whole time—the history of this place, and the knowledge the inhabitants could have gotten from it. Knowing these things could have helped with making discovers.”

“What about the key?” Cassie said with a frown. “What does that mean?”

“I can answer that,” Jim said. “I think I’ve seen it before.”

He reached into his back pocket and withdrew the pirate map. He unfolded it and pressed it against the wall.

“We never drew the Demon Isles,” Jim said. “We thought it was bad luck, that the monster would be able to steal the soul of whoever knew its home. But the treasure was in front of us this whole time. If only we’d taken the time to look at the map properly.”

He pointed to where the Demon Isles were located. In their place had been drawn a mythical monster with the head and torso of a man, his legs replaced by intertwined tentacles. The man held something in each of his hands. In his left, a large old-fashioned key, in the other, a treasure chest.

Bryan looked back at the swirl with a key over it.

“If we hurry, we might not have to fight the pirates after all,” he said. “Come on. Let’s get out of here. This place gives me the creeps.”

“The swirl is located at the back of the island,” Zoe said. “How do we get there?”

“Look next to the image,” Bryan said. “There’s an arrow. I think we’re supposed to head this way.”

The family scooped up what few weapons they’d made and headed into the deep darkness of the cave. They each carried a flaming torch. The family held out their free hands and felt along the rough craggy walls as they crept through the damp corridor, taking care to place their feet.

# 51

THE TUNNEL snaked through the mountain, first up, then down, then a long left and sharp right. They were being led into the bowels of the island, to its hot magma center. Except it wasn't getting hotter, but cooler.

The breeze didn't just come directly at them, but from all sides. Bryan ran his hands over the wall's surface, fingers slipping into little holes there, momentarily plugging the gaps closed.

There was the occasional squeak above them, from soft hairy bodies of what they all knew to be—bats. The family whimpered, crouching down low at a flock of the winged rats. One slapped Bryan's face. Another clung to his shin. He kicked to dislodge it, succeeding only in striking Aaron on the thigh.

The family, relieved, heard the sea long before they saw it. The sound was magnified by the hard rock on either side, a gentle soft shushing.

The family cupped hands over their eyes when they emerged into the light. They breathed in the fresh salty sea air and let the breeze wrap around them.

There was something strange about the noise. Usually, the water that brushed against the land was a soft sound, inhaling and exhaling, gentle and calming. This sound was not relaxing, but a great churning rushing roar, a waterfall, or aggressive rapids over a precipitous rock formation.

Jim recognized the sound first, and edged forward, peering over the cliff, careful to lean back slightly in case the rock beneath him gave way and he needed to make a dive onto more solid ground.

He gasped at what he saw.

The family joined him and exclaimed their own surprise.

The sea swirled in a great circular arc, thick and unyielding. The whirlpool had to be two hundred yards in diameter. Anything that fell into its embrace was doomed to wind up on the seabed, a visible patch of yellow-brown an indiscriminate distance away.

"Well," Zoe said. "That explains the fog, at least."

"What are you talking about?" Cassie said. "It doesn't explain anything, especially not where the Passage is meant to be."

“Fog is simply a cloud that lacks the will to fly,” Zoe said. “I think this whirlpool plays an important role in that. And I think the whirlpool *is* our way out of here.”

“How do you know that?” Cassie said. “Because of a drawing on an old piece of paper?”

“The ancestors of this place knew the way out of here,” Zoe said. “They drew on the cave wall to show they knew. This whirlpool is the spiral. Above it was a key, to unlock the door and go home.”

“You think this might be it?” Bryan said. “You think this might be the end of it all?”

“It’s the end of this world, after all,” Zoe said. “Why wouldn’t the end of the world have a door out?”

“Why not indeed,” a voice behind them said.

The family spun around to find Stoneheart and the remains of his crew behind them. Smithy, Earl and Skinny. They had their pistols drawn, pointed at the family. All but Stoneheart, who had no weapon drawn at all.

“Jim, come stand by me,” Stoneheart said. “These people kidnapped you. I know it’s not your fault you left us.”

Jim’s eyes lowered. He took a shuffling step forward, and then paused. He looked up at Stoneheart and seemed to come to a decision.

“No,” he said. “I’m sorry. I can’t.”

Stoneheart’s look of confusion turned to a glare.

“What?” he said.

“These are good people,” Jim said. “They didn’t force me to do anything. I wanted to leave you. I just wasn’t brave enough to take the final step and do it.”

“Come here,” Stoneheart said, pointing to the ground at his feet. “Now.”

“No,” Jim said.

Bryan stepped forward and placed his hands on Jim’s shoulders.

“You heard what he said,” he said. “He’s staying with us.”

Stoneheart tore his eyes from Bryan and focused on Jim.

“This is your final decision?” he said.

There was something in his eyes, Bryan thought. Mirth? Amusement? Whatever it was, it was at odds with the anger he was exuding.

“So,” Stoneheart said, “after all these years, you’re finally ready.”

“Ready?” Jim said. “Ready for what?”

“To assume responsibility,” Stoneheart said. “For yourself, for others. You see, long ago, someone decided that the only leader worth his salt was the man who wanted to leave. He didn’t want to stay for gold or glory. He wanted to go. He didn’t care about other people. He cared only about what was right. People’s opinions of what counts as ‘right’ varies, of course. But not by that much.”

Jim frowned.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

“Of course you don’t,” Stoneheart said. “But you will, with time. I wish the circumstances could have been better, but there’s no avoiding that now.”

He reached up for his glass eye with both hands and pulled at it.

“Oh, that’s disgusting!” Skinny said. “I’m going to be sick.”

Stoneheart held the eye in his hand, and then tossed it to Jim. Jim opened his palm, a look of surprise on his face.

“It’s not a real glass eye?” he said.

“It itches something terrible at times,” Stoneheart said. “But there’s no permanent damage.”

He had a pair of perfectly normal functioning eyes, deep chestnut brown.

“But why?” Jim said.

“Because it’s what the original Stoneheart wore,” Stoneheart said.

“The original Stoneheart?” Smithy said. “You’re not the original captain?”

“The original Stoneheart died one hundred and sixty years ago,” Stoneheart said. “No one lives that long. But legends can live forever, with the right upkeep.”

“So who are you really?” Jim said.

“All in good time,” Stoneheart said.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Smithy said, his pistol still trained on the family. “Let me get this straight. You want Jim to be captain? Our captain? Unless you didn’t notice, we don’t have a ship no more. Or crew.”

“We’ll get new ones,” Stoneheart said.

“New ones,” Smithy said under his breath. “Because we’re so easily replaceable.”

“Bluntly put,” Stoneheart said. “But in essence, correct. There can only be one Captain Stoneheart. Whoever wears that roving eye is Stoneheart.”

“I’m not so sure I like being someone so easily replaceable,” Smithy said.

“Unfortunately for you, you are,” Stoneheart said.

Smithy’s expression grew hard.

“The Celeste is at the bottom of the ocean, the crew is dead, and we’re all that’s left,” Smithy said. “I think it’s about time we had a new captain.”

“That’s mutinous talk,” Stoneheart said.

“Glad we understand one another,” Smithy said.

“Stand down,” Stoneheart said, voice hard.

Smithy’s pistol began to lower. Then he looked up into Stoneheart’s eyes. A grin spread across his face. His pistol rose to face Stoneheart.

“No,” he said. “I don’t think I will. I think I’ll stand up to my full height, become the man I always had the potential of being, and not be kept down by the likes of you.”

“Stand down *now*,” Stoneheart said.

“What do you think, men?” Smithy said to Skinny and Earl. “Do you want to follow him, a man who sacrificed the rest of his own crew to save himself, a man who let the Celeste rest at the bottom of the sea? Or do you want to follow someone new? Someone responsible, who knows what they’re doing?”

Thinking was not Skinny and Earl’s strength, but they were girded by Stoneheart’s conviction and managed a non-committed shrug.

“That’s good enough for me,” Smithy said.

They aimed their pistols at Stoneheart.

“Get over there with them,” Smithy said. “It’s where you belong.”

Stoneheart growled, but did as he was told.

“Toss your pistol and knife over,” Smithy said. “Easy, now.”

Stoneheart tossed his pistol aside. He extricated his knife, seemed to consider it for a moment, and then threw it aside too.

“The eye, if you please,” Smithy said to Jim.

Jim closed his hand over it, feeling its smooth surface on his fingers, but decided against making a stand now. It would only get him shot, and Smithy would get the eye anyway. Jim tossed the eye to Smithy, who caught and appraised it. He put it in his eye. He turned to Skinny and Earl.

“Hey,” he said. “How do I look?”

“Fierce,” Skinny said.

“Infamous,” Earl said.

“Just let us go,” Bryan said. “We’ll jump into the whirlpool, and you’ll never see us again.”

“And why would we want that?” Smithy said with a glint in his eye. “You and I have unfinished business. Or rather, your ladies do.”

“You expect me to fall for your empty pistol trick again?” Bryan said.

“My pistol isn’t empty,” Smithy said.

“Prove it,” Bryan said.

He was going to get shot anyway. It may as well be quickly, and on his own terms.

“As you wish,” Smithy said.

He pulled the hammer back and squeezed the trigger.

*Clack!*

Smithy looked at his gun like it was an alien object. He pulled the hammer back and tried again.

*Clack! Clack!*

Smithy tossed his pistol aside. It broke in half on the hard rock.

“You hopped off your ship’s boat to pull it on shore, didn’t you?” Bryan said. “It’s the water. Gunpowder is useless when it’s wet.”

Smithy growled in the back of his throat.

“Shoot them!” he said.

Skinny and Earl didn’t hesitate, pulling their triggers.

*Clack! Clack!*

“There’s more than one way to skin a cat,” Smithy said. “Blades!”

All three men unsheathed their knives and approached the family. Cassie extracted the sharpened sticks she’d made earlier.

“Give those to me,” Stoneheart said.

Cassie handed them over. The captain held one in each hand, tucking them close to his forearms and holding the sharp point in his palms.

“I’ve waited a long time for this!” Skinny said. “I’m going to enjoy every second of tearing you apart-”

He hit the floor after just a single combination, Stoneheart’s hands a blur. A stick jutted from the side of his neck.

Earl dropped his knife and ran, disappearing into the cave.

“Coward,” Smithy said.

He turned to Stoneheart.

“Well, let’s get this over with,” Smithy said. “I never much rated your fighting abilities.”

“Then perhaps you can educate me,” Stoneheart said.

Smithy squared off against Stoneheart, entering a hunched stance. He attacked, leaping and bringing his knife down in a vicious arc.

Stoneheart blocked with his forearm and stabbed with his stick. Smithy ducked. Stoneheart caught the dodge early and hopped back. Smithy slashed at his midriff, missing by an inch.

*Bang!*

Smithy clutched his chest and stumbled back, eyes wide. His hand came away red. He fell to his knees and looked up to find Jim holding a pistol.

“What did you do that for?” Stoneheart said. “I could handle him.”

“I know,” Jim said with a shrug. “I just thought it might save some time. And my pistol never got wet.”

Smithy fell forward onto his face. He didn’t move again.

“Now,” Bryan said. “Would you mind explaining what’s going on here?”

A solid *Thunk!* echoed from the cave, followed by a second hollow thud. A figure emerged from the cave carrying an oar, snapped off at the handle. The figure dumped Earl’s unconscious body at the mouth of the cave and stepped into the moonlight.

“I believe this belongs to you,” Admiral said.

“Thanks,” Bryan said. “But we were trying to get rid of our trash.”

Admiral was drenched head to foot. His chest heaved, still recovering from an earlier ordeal. He looked like a man who had entered a nightmare and managed, against the odds, to come out the other end.

“Stoneheart,” Admiral said. “At last we meet.”

Stoneface turned to face Admiral, a deliberately slow movement.

And then something very strange happened.

The paddle clattered to the hard rocky ground. Admiral turned a curious shade of white, and then green. He stumbled to one side, unable to take his eyes from the pirate captain.

“No…” Admiral said.

Bryan looked the stunned Admiral over, his square jaw, his tall height. He reminded him of someone else, but couldn’t quite put his finger on who…

And then it struck him. He didn’t have to look far.

“Nice to see you, big brother,” Stoneheart said.

The other family members, shocked, looked from him to Bryan and Admiral. At first they didn't understand who he was talking to. And then it became clear.

"I wondered when you were going to recognize me," Stoneheart said.

"The wanted posters don't do you justice," Admiral said. "And the glass eye threw me somewhat."

"The legend of Stoneheart is one hundred and sixty years old," Stoneheart said. "You don't honestly believe a man could remain alive that long?"

"No," Admiral said. "Of course not. I assumed it was a myth, something only the pirates believed."

"There have been many Captain Stonehearts over the years," Stoneheart said. "He took on an apprentice at all times, and once the apprentice was old enough, after he had learned everything he needed in order to assume the Stoneheart title, he was told the truth of the Stoneheart legend and received the mantel himself. I don't know who the original Stoneheart was, but he must have been someone quite formidable.

"But that legend was going to end with Jim. He was going to become Captain Stoneheart, and he was going to return to New London and reveal his true identity. He was going to unite both pirates and Brits, by power and title. It would mark the end of the war."

"Jim?" Admiral said, confused as to who Stoneheart was referring to.

His eyes came to the boy, Jim. He looked him over.

"What title does he have?" Admiral said. "He's nothing more than a cabin boy."

"Only on the surface," Stoneheart said. "Imagine him in fine silks and lace."

Admiral cocked his head to one side and looked Jim over. He shook his head. He still didn't recognize who he was.

"His is the only title that matters," Stoneheart said, prodding Admiral further.

Admiral frowned. He calculated the boy's age. He had to be fifteen, sixteen. If he had a title, why would he limit himself by working on a pirate ship? Unless he didn't make the decision himself. Unless he was forced into it. Unless he himself didn't even know the truth…

"My God…" Admiral said.

“Yes,” Stoneheart said. “He carries the family resemblance, doesn’t he?”

“Show me your arms!” Admiral said, closing on Jim.

Bryan stepped between them, protecting Jim.

“You won’t come another step closer,” Bryan said. “Not until someone explains what’s going on here.”

“It’s very complicated,” Admiral said. “Where do we even begin?”

“Where all good stories start, I suppose,” Stoneheart said. “At the beginning.”

# 52

“YOU’RE BROTHERS?” Bryan said. “But how did you get split up in the first place?”

“Twins in a royal house?” Stoneheart says. “It would tear the empire apart as soon as our father died. The rich and powerful would form factions, breaking away. Even if only one of us wanted to be king, the scheming would never end. The decision was made to hide one of us—the younger twin—for him to grow up as a minor lord, never knowing who he truly was, what he should have become—a prince of the realm.”

“It wasn’t until recently I was told I had a twin,” Admiral said. “By an old minister with one burden too many on his consciousness. I tried for many years to locate him, but all my investigations led me to a burned house on the east coast. Whatever happened, I was too late.”

“That was when we were attacked by my predecessor and his pirates,” Stoneheart said. “They killed the others, but Stoneheart took pity on me. I didn’t know why until the night he died. He waited until I was of age to become Stoneheart, and to tell me the truth. He was the father I never had. He was stern, but fair. Everything our father is not. I never found out how he knew who I was. He said it was my destiny to join the two factions together. But I had a problem.

“The noble houses would never accept me as their prince, never mind their king, not when I had spent so many years with the pirates. They would always dispute my blood’s claim to the throne. After all, I had no evidence besides my passable likeness with the king and his eldest son, and half a birthmark, which could be declared a fake.

“And then fate intervened.

“I heard of a newborn prince that carried the king’s favor. It was then I knew it must be him who would unite the two factions. But I needed him in my control, and not to be ruined by our father. And so I kidnaped the new prince, and let Father know it was I, Stoneheart, who had taken him. Like many of the noble houses, he was fearful of Stoneheart and his legacy. He knew what I would do to the young prince if he threatened me.”

“That was why Father wouldn’t allow me to fire upon the pirates,” Admiral said, piecing together the puzzle. “He didn’t care for the pirates, only the Mary Celeste. But he could not admit that without revealing too much about what had happened.

“He wanted his youngest prince’s fake death to be a secret, knowing the other houses would act and try to exploit him if they knew the truth. He knew Jim, the boy he intended on becoming his heir, was aboard the Mary Celeste.”

“The king did not care if I was killed,” Stoneheart said. “Nothing like paternal love. But Jim, he was everything to him. The son he always wanted. You know how he doted on him. He would not risk his life.

“And I knew he would spoil him, as he had done to you, Admiral. Where he had deprived you of love and affection, he would stifle Jim. I am only sorry I was not there to help you bear the burden. Only I was spared from his evil influences. I was raised on the honor code of pirates. It is greatly underestimated. It is not your fault you turned out the way you have.

“I saw what you had become. I saw what the power you wielded was doing to you. I knew how power corrupts, more than most. But for me it was always an act. A reputation can be used as a shield if used correctly. If a man develops a reputation as an early riser…”

“He can wake at noon,” Bryan said. “But all those things you did…”

“I did few of them,” Stoneheart said. “They were merely rumors I had circulated. A reputation needs maintenance every now and then.”

“And the things I did…” Admiral said.

“You have gone mad,” Stoneheart said. “Quite mad. That was clear to me from the rumors I heard of you. It has been coming over you for quite some time, I think.”

“Yes,” Admiral said, and he looked incredibly tired. “Yes, it has. It has been a heavy burden to bear.”

“And now you no longer need to bear it, at least not alone,” Stoneheart said.

“Except I must pay for the things I have done,” Admiral said. “The people I killed… The devices I had built…”

“Devices?” Stoneheart said. “What devices?”

“The pods,” Admiral said. “A man came to me… A black cowled figure…”

He shook his head.

“But none of that matters now,” he said. “I shall have them all destroyed.”

“But why would the king or nobles of New London accept Jim as the young prince?” Bryan said. “Why didn’t you try to bring the two factions together yourself?”

Stoneheart pulled the sleeve up on Jim’s shirt, exposing a hammer and sickle shaped birthmark.

“Because of this,” he said.

He pulled up his own shirtsleeve, revealing a hammer. Admiral pulled up his own sleeve, showing a sickle.

“As twins, we share the birthmark,” Stoneheart said. “Only Jim has the complete stamp.”

Admiral knelt down with his two brothers and braced Jim’s shoulder.

“I have so much to share with you,” he said. “I’m sorry I did not spend the time with you I could have. But that is something I will make up to you.”

“I look forward to it,” Jim said.

Stoneheart kneeled down beside Admiral and looked into Jim’s eyes.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you everything,” he said. “But I needed you to understand the world, the pirates. It is only someone from within that can understand us, where we come from, what we stand for. I was going to tell you in due time.”

“It’s okay,” Jim said. “So, you aren’t really dying.”

“Far from it,” Stoneheart said. “That was just my act for letting you take over. Usually the Stoneheart captains wait until their charge is fully grown, but I could not afford to wait that long.”

“It doesn’t mean much now the Mary Celeste is at the bottom of the ocean and the crew dead,” Jim said.

“No,” Stoneheart said. “It only adds to the Stoneheart legend. So long as you live, that legend belongs to you. The pirates will listen to you, the British will fear you. With blood of the king running through your veins, there is nothing to stop you uniting the two factions.”

“You never desired the throne for yourself?” Admiral said to Stoneheart.

“Never,” Stoneheart said.

“In that, at least, we are the same,” Admiral said with a smile. “But there is no reason for the plan to not take place. I will abdicate and take myself far from the known world, somewhere where my madness will not harm another.”

Stoneheart rested a hand on his brother’s shoulder.

“You will not have to do it alone,” he said.

Admiral put his hand over his brother’s.

“Thank you,” he said. “Brother.”

“Always and forever,” Stoneheart said.

He bent down, extricated the glass eye cover from Smithy’s corpse, and handed it to Jim.

“Here,” he said. “It’s time to assume your responsibilities.”

Stoneheart put the glass eye over Jim’s eye.

“How does it feel?” he said.

“Surprisingly comfortable,” Jim said.

“That’s disgusting,” Zoe said. “What about the germs?”

Stoneheart frowned.

“What are germs?” he said.

“You’ll discover them,” Zoe said. “Eventually.”

Admiral stood up.

“I must apologize for the way I treated you,” Admiral said to the family.

“It’s okay,” Bryan said. “No permanent damage done.”

“I’m sorry too,” Stoneheart said. “For what it’s worth, I wouldn’t have really let the men have you.”

Cassie and Zoe folded their arms and looked away. Clearly they still needed some time before they could bring themselves to forgive him for that.

“I guess you guys ought to be getting back to your world now,” Jim said.

“You can still come with us, if you want,” Aaron said.

“I’ve got things to do here,” Jim said.

“Are you sure?” Aaron said.

Jim looked at his elder brothers. The family he’d always wanted.

“Yes, I’m sure,” he said, before grinning ear to ear. “Besides, I get to be king here.”

“I guess we can’t compete with that,” Aaron said.

They embraced. Cassie shook the young prince’s hand.

“From pauper to prince,” she said. “There’s a story there somewhere.”

“I’d like to say ‘Thank you for everything,’” Bryan said. “But, well, you know.”

Admiral and Stoneheart smiled and nodded.

“You can stay with us here, if you want,” Stoneheart said. “We’ll need modern ideas for a new, modern world.”

“There’s plenty on the cave wall to keep you entertained for a few hundred years,” Zoe said. “You don’t need us.”

The family approached the edge of the precipice, held hands, and looked down into the swirling vortex. It filled them with fear.

“Are we ready for this?” Bryan said.

“To commit suicide?” Cassie said. “Is anyone ever ready?”

They held hands.

“On the count of three,” Bryan said. “One, two…”

“Wait,” Aaron said. “I can’t.”

“Oh, jump already!” Admiral said.

He shoved Bryan over the edge and into the swirling vortex. Bryan’s weight brought Zoe, Cassie and Aaron in with him. They bobbed in the water, moving slowly.

“This isn’t so bad,” Cassie said, wiping the water from her eyes.

“We haven’t even started yet,” Bryan said.

The water picked up speed, gaining in momentum the closer they came to the center of the whirlpool. They kept hold of one another’s hands. The rush of water blew their hair back, refreshing. As they approached the seabed they all screamed, but it was lost to the roaring tempest rush.

The seabed opened up at the last second, like a giant mouth, and the family flew into it, spinning end over end.

It was dark and hot, heating up to a temperature they could barely stand.

# 53

THE FAMILY was spat out one by one, kicking up puffs of dry black dust. Zoe screamed and landed on Bryan, winding him, her knee finding him between the legs.

“Are you all right, Bryan?” Zoe said.

“Super,” Bryan said, his voice a few tones higher than usual.

“Can I help?” Zoe said.

“I think you’ve helped enough,” Bryan said.

He lay on his front, his face in the dust and his hands cupped over his crotch.

“Just give me a minute,” he said.

“Look at this place,” Aaron said.

“One thing’s for sure,” Cassie said. “We’re not back in Kansas yet.”

They were in a black ash fire-blasted world of fire and brimstone. Geysers of hot air belched sulphur, and red hot seams of fire wove across the arid landscape.

“My God,” Aaron said, peering around at the others. “We’re in hell.”

No one disagreed.

# EPILOGUE

ADMIRAL couldn’t recall a happier time. He joked and played with his brothers, something he hadn’t done since he was a child, before the weight of his father’s expectations fell like a ten ton weight upon his shoulders. Perhaps, with his brothers’ help, he might be able to beat the madness he felt nipping at the inside of his mind into submission.

He began to wonder about the cloaked figure. Was he real, or just a figment of his imagination? There had been something otherworldly about him. Perhaps the world existed only in the Admiral’s mind.

But had he also dreamed the blueprints? Had he drawn them in his sleep? No. He didn’t believe that. He possessed neither the skill nor the creative ability for such things. But he did know he never wished to see that figure again.

The full weight of what they needed to do in the coming years made him feel tired already. They would have to present Jim to the king and convince him he really was the long lost prince. Then the twin brothers would have to protect and educate their little brother in all the ways of New London and how to play at the complicated political games the lords and ladies were so fond of. He would need to become a master, as his father was. Jim was of an age where his father’s influence could no longer stifle nor poison him. He could develop by himself at his own pace.

Jim was in the middle of his pirate impression when the water began to burble. It hissed with spray from some unseen underwater pressure. Their ship’s boat struck something under the surface.

“Get back!” Stoneheart said. “It’s a monster!”

“It’s not a monster,” Admiral said, voice distant. “It’s a pod.”

The glass front opened, revealing a figure clothed in black.

So he was real after all, Admiral thought. He knew he was, of course. But that didn’t mean he wished he wasn’t. The blood seeped from Stoneheart’s body as he stared in fear at the black cloaked man, who just sat there, unmoving.

“I have to go,” Admiral said.

He felt like he was watching himself say this.

“What?” Stoneheart said. “No. You can’t.”

“I have to,” Admiral said. “Or he’ll take us all.”

“He can’t,” Stoneheart said. “He only has one pod. We can’t all fit in there.”

Gas hissed from a dozen pods as they rose from the depths. A second ring formed around the first. None of the other glass doors opened.

Stoneheart scrunched up his face and put his foot on the pod. He shouted at the figure at the controls.

“You can’t have him, do you hear me?” Stoneheart said. “He belongs to us! He’s our brother!”

The cowled figure did not respond, and sat there, unflinching, unmoving.

“It has to be this way,” Admiral said. “There is no other.”

“We can fight them!” Stoneheart said.

“They have weapons and technology we can’t even dream of,” Admiral said. “We would not survive them long.”

He put his hand on his twin brother’s shoulder. After all these years, after all this time, they only got to spend a few minutes with one another.

“You can do what needs to be done,” Admiral said with confidence. “I’m sorry I won’t be there to help you.”

He bent down to Jim.

“I’m sorry most of all to you, Jim,” he said. “Or should I say, my king. I’m sorry for not seeing the kind of man you’ll grow up to be. A great man. But I hope you’ll remember me, for this decision if not for anything else I may have done.”

He turned and stepped into the pod. The glass door slid into place with a solid *thunk!* The pod immediately began to sink beneath the waves, the two dozen other pods following soon after.

Admiral wondered how long he would get to live before the cowled figure would jettison his body into the open seas. *Not long*, he surmised. The cowled figure’s thumb was already hovering over the big red button on the joystick.

He would get killed by a monster in the water after all, the worst monster he had ever encountered. He said a prayer and prepared to accept his fate.

# Veins of Fire

# Rosetta #1

“TELL ME what I’m doing here,” Admiral said. “And why I’m not enjoying the state banquet I’ve been looking forward to for the past week.”

First Mate gulped, swallowing hard, and began to recite the explanation he’d prepared. He hoped to God it met expectations. The admiral had a reputation as someone who did not like to be disturbed. A hard nut. It was best not to disappoint him.

“A contingent of locals came across the Nebuchadnezzar in the Gulf of New Scotland six hours ago,” First Mate said, loosening his collar with a finger. It suddenly felt very tight. “She was sat there, adrift. She made no attempt to communicate, no attempt to make first contact, and no one was seen on board. Finally, one of the locals cultivated enough courage to tap on the ship’s hull.”

Just as they were doing now. The rowboat they were sat in drew alongside the Nebuchadnezzar. The men held the boat steady as Admiral reached up and seized the rope ladder. He began to ascend. First Mate followed in his wake. The climb was easy, and the men on board snapped to attention once Admiral presented himself.

“A woman leaned over the side, peering down at them,” First Mate said, resuming his report. “She had a big smile on her face and said she was wondering when one of them was going to come say hello. She declared herself the captain of the Nebuchadnezzar and wanted to speak to a British official.”

“A British official,” Admiral said. “And you sent for me?”

A fresh sweat broke out on the First Mate’s brow. It had been with a great deal of introspection that he had finally called the admiral of the British fleet. He hadn’t wanted to, but rules were rules.

That’s why orders were so important—they were designed not only to give someone a job to do, but to protect them should their actions come into question. Usually, upper levels of command were not called in for such occasions as this. Their time was reserved for the big decisions, for providing direction.

But First Mate had an ace up his sleeve.

“You wished for us to contact you, to keep an eye out for anyone we thought didn’t belong in our world,” he said.

Admiral came to a stop. He turned to face First Mate.

“You mentioned a woman,” he said. “Is she…?”

“One of the ladies from the family?” First Mate said. “No, sir. She’s certainly not one of them.”

“Then who is she?” Admiral said. “And how do you know she’s not a pirate?”

“She says she’s not,” First Mate said. “And, well, there’s the little matter of the technology she carries with her.”

Admiral cast a look over the assembled men on the deck. Now he looked, he could see they were spooked by something. It was in their frenetic body movement, in their roving eyes that could not stay still on a single object. It was in their feet that jittered side to side.

“Are we to expect a great deal more of these people from now on?” Admiral said, grumbling under his breath. “Coming here to visit us from on high as some kind of tourist attraction?”

“With all due respect, sir,” First Mate said, “the lady in question doesn’t strike me as the tourist type.”

“How do you mean?” Admiral said.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to see for yourself, sir,” First Mate said.

Admiral nodded.

“I understand she put up something of a fight,” he said.

“She did indeed sir,” First Mate said. “She being a lady meant the pirates underestimated her. They did not wait to put hands on her the moment she came on board. She even sent our own men sprawling across the deck.”

Admiral’s eyebrows rose on his forehead.

“She sent men *sprawling*?” he said.

“Yes sir,” First Mate said with a small smile on his lips. “Sprawling. The men’s own words.”

“What set her off in the first place?” Admiral said.

“Our men didn’t treat her with the respect she felt she deserved,” First Mate said. “Which is the same reason she decided to take control of this ship. Apparently the pirates mistook her for a sea spirit at first. She was adrift at sea. After she managed to convince them she was a mortal woman, they were only too happy to let her on board.”

“And then?” Admiral said.

“And then…” First Mate said, before turning red. “She was insulted by the men’s attentions.”

After news of the sunken Mary Celeste had reached the ears of the pirates, a deep feeling of unrest had settled in. She, along with the legend of Stoneheart, was the backbone of the pirate nation. And when news surfaced about Stoneheart being a long lost descendant of the British throne, all hell broke loose. The pirates and the British were family.

As the number of pirates increased, the newly crowned king decided to set them up in their own towns along the British coast. There was no way they were going to be able to fully integrate with the rest of the British empire, not yet in any case. You couldn’t build a bridge over centuries of animosity like that. It was what the new king wanted, but it was not what was in the hearts and minds of the people, and they were what really mattered.

“Where are the injured men?” Admiral said.

“We put them in the captain’s quarters,” First Mate said. “But I wouldn’t go in there if I were you, sir.”

“Why not?” Admiral said.

“It’s… not fit for civilized eyes,” First Mate said.

Admiral smirked. He was often surprised by the meekness of the British persona.

“I am admiral of the British navy,” he said. “I’ve seen things that would curl your hair. I think I can bear to see whatever’s on the other side of this door.”

He pushed the door open. On the floor was the former pirate captain and his senior officers. They lay on their front with their asses in the air. It was an odd position, but as he looked closer it became apparent it was entirely necessary. For, protruding from their rears, were…

“Oh my God!” Admiral said.

He shut the door and held his hand over his mouth. He was silent a moment before locking eyes with First Mate.

“Can our doctors help them?” Admiral said.

“They believe so,” First Mate said. “The only way to deal with them is to remove the… foreign objects as quickly as possible.”

“How did she get the oars all the way up there like that?” Admiral said.

“Without much difficulty, apparently,” First Mate said.

In all his years as captain of the Mary Celeste, Admiral, formerly known as Stoneheart, had never seen anything quite like what he had just witnessed. There was cruelty and torture, and then there was sadism…

“Does she have superhuman strength?” Admiral said.

“Funny you should mention that,” First Mate said. “She is built a little… differently to the rest of us.”

“Differently how?” Admiral said.

First Mate searched for the right words, but they didn’t come.

“It’s perhaps better if you come look for yourself sir,” he said.

They walked down the stairs to the lower decks.

“How’s your father now?” Admiral said by way of conversation.

“He’s fine now, sir,” First Mate said. “He’s got his own room and pencils and he works with the other cartographers. I see him every day I make port. He’s much happier now.”

“Good,” Admiral said. “It’s thanks to your father that we have a chance to become something more than we are, how we can develop.”

Half a dozen men with dark bags under their eyes stiffened and saluted as Admiral and First Mate approached. First Mate pushed the door open and stepped inside.

On the other side of the table sat a woman. She was disheveled, her clothing torn, worn around the edges. She was clearly misplaced. She did not belong in this world, like an element in a painting, etched in a different style to the rest. She did not conform to the usual meekness of the British female population. They would not have met a man’s eye, not on the first meeting, especially when he was of such an obviously superior stature as Admiral. But here she was, glaring at him with a fierceness Admiral had only ever seen in the eye of the most dangerous pirate elements.

She had not changed out of her clothes, a style of dress Admiral recognized immediately as that of surface dwellers. How a woman could show so much of herself and not feel ashamed was beyond him.

She wasn’t Cassie, never mind Zoe, not even close. To think a little lady of this size had inspired such fear in fully grown, and even overgrown, murdering pirates and British sailors was quite something.

“Hello,” Admiral said. “I’m Admiral. How are you?”

“Now you make idle chit chat?” the woman said. “Let’s get down to business. I’m through wasting time. I’m looking for a family.”

“We have many families here,” Admiral said.

“I appreciate that,” the woman said. “But the family I’m looking for doesn’t belong here.”

“And why wouldn’t they belong here?” Admiral said.

“Because they’re from another world,” the woman said.

“Can you describe them?” Admiral said.

“No,” the woman said. “Because I think you know precisely who I’m talking about. It’s what comes with being trained in the army. You quickly learn how to recognize subtle nuances in human facial expressions. I suspect you’re the same, even from a world such as this.”

She squinted, eying Admiral up and down.

“Except you’re not really who you say you are, are you?” she said. “You’re pretending. You, like me, would have picked up on the subtle shifting of the brow muscles, the slackening of the jowls. I can tell you’re the kind of man experienced at hiding his emotions. You’re exceptionally good at it, if you don’t mind me saying. But alas, not good enough. Everyone has their tell. Now, stop wasting my time and tell me where they are.”

Admiral blinked in surprise at her outburst. Not so much at her directness, but at her apparent ability to see through bullshit when she smelt it. She was right, of course.

After Stoneheart’s brother was taken from him by the cowled figure in his floating pod device, it was decided between himself and Jim that it would be best if he took up his twin brother’s position as Admiral. It meant a smoother transition for Jim when he assumed the crown.

It wasn’t six hours later they learned the king was already dead. They’d had to act fast to seize the crown and navy before the nobles got their filthy little paws on either. They’d been on the back foot ever since, maintaining their hold.

No one had seen through his disguise, preferring to keep their distance from the admiral’s boisterous nature. Only this foreign woman had guessed the truth.

Admiral turned to First Mate.

“Step outside,” he said.

First Mate glanced at the woman, then nodded, saluted, and left.

Admiral turned back to the woman. He let his gaze drift down to the metal of her arm. He was mesmerized by the way it caught the light and made it dance.

“Where did you get that?” he said.

“The same place you’ll get yours if you don’t tell me what I want to know,” the woman said.

“You’re restrained,” Admiral said.

“Whatever gave you that idea?” the woman said.

She raised her hands, showing the restraints. The metal was twisted beyond recognition.

“Oh, you mean these?” she said. “Advice for the next time you take captive a prisoner with a robotic arm: don’t.”

She stood up and tossed the restraints on the table. Admiral goggled back and forth between her and the crushed metal. He turned pale, before letting himself smile sheepishly.

“What’s your name?” he said.

“Rosetta,” the woman said. “My name’s Rosetta.”

# 1.

THE CONCERNS of a Humungo bird are not altogether dissimilar to the concerns of any other creature taking care of its young, it just had more powerful weapons to carry out those desires than most.

It had the wingspan of a light aircraft, and though those could not be considered weapons in and of themselves, they were exceptionally useful in escaping danger, or to swoop down on its prey from a great height. Its powerful jaws were long and thick, and though they were not made for snapping or tearing, they could grip its target tight, and then use its superior weight and strength to crush its victims.

Doubters of dinosaurs having turned into birds over many millennia need only glance at this impressive specimen to realize their error.

In the air it was the supreme commander of the skies. On land it suffered from the same awkward gawkiness of its feathered cousin the albatross, and bore the ugly elongated snout of its distant cousin the pterodon. It was the perfect crossing point of evolution.

Once upon a time this whole world had been cast in darkness with the wingspans of Humungo birds, wingtips almost touching as they scouted for food. But those days were well and truly gone, and this bird and its nest were the only family remaining, which was why it was so important for the Humungo to ensure its chicks got all the food they needed. They were the last family, the final survivors. They needed to succeed.

The Humungo stood on an outcrop of rock overlooking what were known as the Blasted Lands. It had once been green and gorgeous with vegetation, and though the Humungo would never be able to put its feelings into words, it wished with a deep longing that it could have given its chicks a better start in life, something more for them to cling to than arid rock.

The Blasted Lands were growing, a fungus on once fertile land. There would only be more of this, the Humungo knew. Its chicks would need to be ready to face it.

Creatures felt the deep resonance beneath the fabric of life more acutely than man. It feared for their future, for this whole world. It had a churning

sensation in its belly that had little to do with the rocks it swallowed to mash up its food. It sensed something bad was coming, and soon.

The Humungo had managed to survive this long because it was stronger and cleverer than most, but that was not always enough. The Humungo looked down at its malformed stunted leg, ending in a thin wedge of mutated flesh. It had been too slow reacting to a sabre-toothed rabbit that had seized it in its jaws when he had made a desperate dive for the tasty morsel. The Humungo had almost ended up on the menu itself.

There was a scream, muffled by distance, followed by another, and then another, each at varying pitches. The Humungo's sense of hearing was not good, but it was enough for it to pick up on the screaming creatures down in the crevasse, getting spat out of the geyser. The bird ruffled its dirty haggard feathers and turned its head.

These creatures were small, with little fur. They lacked the large canines of the sabre-rabbit and claws of the sloth-bear. They would not put up much resistance, the bird was sure.

The Humungo croaked and hopped excitedly from one foot to the other. It leapt off its perch and onto the upward jetstream, the dust and heat from the magma brushing against its wings, patting them dry. It threw its weight down, forcing itself in the direction of the family below.

For once, dinner had come to the Humungo.

# 2.

THE EARTH was black and carved from flowing charcoal, with flickering veins of artery embers. Curled hollowed trees clutched their chests in a pained embrace, and the wind blew across the vast expanse howling without hope. The family had died and gone to hell.

Was this a foreboding premonition of how the surface was going to die? Was this how the universe would end? With the all-consuming torrent of a raging blistering tempest? A spark would catch, ignite, and there would be nothing left of the world once it had completed its work.

“What do you think this is?” Zoe said. “One of Dante’s seven circles?”

“Too literary for me,” Bryan said. “I prefer the term ‘hell’.”

Thick grey-black clouds swirled above their heads and obscured the sky, making it shimmer like a thick curtain. One thing was for sure: they were still not on the surface.

“At least there’s no water here,” Cassie said.

“Is that meant to be a comfort?” Aaron said.

“No water, no plants, no life,” Bryan said. “It’s a wasteland.”

Cassie shrugged. She failed to see the problem.

“It means we can get through this world faster than any of the others,” she said.

“It’d be a lot easier if we had someone to tell us where the Passage was,” Zoe said. “Otherwise we’re going to end up spending forever looking for where it might be.”

“Still,” Cassie said. “It’s got to be better than the world we were last in, don’t you think?”

But Bryan and Zoe’s expressions and ensuing silence made their opinions quite clear on the subject. They were not relieved. The expanse of the land seemed to roll on into an eternity of hellish landscape.

“Well,” Cassie said. “Do you want to choose our direction, or should I? Woah!”

Cassie’s legs shook. She felt unsteady on her feet.

“Do you feel that?” she said.

The ground and walls vibrated, raining dust down on their heads. Rocks fell through the smoke and clattered at the family's feet, shattering like they were made of glass. The family rocked and almost fell off their feet.

"Lean against the wall!" Bryan said.

The wall was rough and had holes in it like Swiss cheese. They pressed themselves against it, hooking their fingers in the gaps like handholds. Aaron hit the deck, landing on his ass. His eyes widened, looking up at something falling toward him. He reacted fast, pulling his legs apart as a rock smashed into the hard stone, inches from his crotch.

The shaking subsided and the world returned to its usual blistering calm. Bryan helped Aaron to his feet.

"That was a close call, huh?" he said.

There was a tearing sound as Aaron got to his feet. The bottom half of one pants leg had been torn off at the knee, trapped under the miniature boulder that had almost pulverized him.

"Closer than I thought," Aaron said.

"What was that?" Cassie said.

"An earthquake," Zoe said. "Not a very big one, judging by the fallout. Which is just as well. I'm not sure this world could take much more than something on the lower end of the Richter scale. This earth we're standing on is rigid. It'd crack right open if the earthquake was any larger."

"Look," Bryan said.

He gestured to a finger of molten lava that dribbled down one wall, pooled, and then ran along the ground, apparently following it downhill. It joined a spiderweb of other fiery tracks, forming an assault course of fire.

"We're going to need to get across," Bryan said.

The course was crisscrossed by dozens of such fiery tracks, a hopscotch patchwork quilt. The family ran and jumped across each in turn, the searing heat stabbing at the underside of their arms and legs. The ground they landed on was hard and solid.

Bryan leapt and landed on another square of the hard black rock. But this time it lifted up, bucking like a baying horse.

"Woah!" Bryan said.

He leaned forward, his weight just enough to carry him forward. He hit the deck. The rock floated in place. Bryan stood in the middle, knees bent, keeping his balance.

"Now what do we do?" Aaron said.

Bryan got up, careful to place his feet so he wouldn't rock too much. He looked back. What he saw made his eyes widen.

"We hurry, that's what we do," he said.

The others turned to look at what had spooked Bryan. Behind them, a dozen yards out but catching up quick, was a torrent of red, orange and yellow. A liquid magma river.

"Why are things never easy?" Zoe said.

She turned and coiled her legs to jump.

"Wait!" Bryan said. "Let me get into position so I can counteract your landing. The last thing we need is for this rock to tilt over."

The sweat dripped from their brows, turning the black dust to mud.

"So much for heading back the way we came," Cassie grumbled.

"Ready?" Zoe said.

"Go for it," Bryan said.

Zoe leapt, and at the same moment that she landed, Bryan stepped back. The rock leaned to one side, but Bryan was quick to counter it.

"Now, you two!" Bryan said to the kids.

They coiled their legs, ran, and jumped. They hit the deck of the rock just as Zoe stepped toward the middle, balancing it out.

"Now what do we do?" Cassie said.

"Now we need to run," Bryan said.

"Run?" Aaron said. "Are you crazy? One slip and we're goners!"

"The magma is catching up fast," Bryan said. "We'll need to move fast if we're to keep ahead of it."

Aaron shook his head. He wasn't the sportiest kid in the world, but even he knew what the human body was capable of if its existence was threatened.

"All right," he said. "Let's do this."

"On the count of one," Bryan said.

A rock behind them hissed as it was pulled under by the surging magma nipping at their heels.

"One!" Bryan said.

Bryan jumped first, hitting the next floating rock. It leaned up. Bryan was quick to use his momentum to throw himself forward. The rock moved with him, but before it had sunk too low, Zoe was jumping. She hit the back of the rock, and it immediately straightened.

Bryan leapt for the next rock while Zoe dashed forward. Cassie jumped. They ran like this, one rock after another, each member timing their jumps carefully, or else risk upsetting the delicate balancing act they were performing.

Bryan puffed and counted his steps. One, two, jump. One, two, jump. He could spy the end of the trail ahead. If they could just get there…

Another two jumps, and Bryan hit the hard rocky surface. Salvation! It was a relief when it didn't tilt up, when it didn't rock beneath his feet. It caught him by surprise. He tripped on his toes and skidded across the ground. He wasn't the only victim, as Zoe hit the deck beside him. She was followed by Aaron and Zoe.

They were puffing and panting, out of breath. They rolled onto their backs to peer at the magma as it oozed toward them, and then lapped at the edge of the unmoving rock they were perched on.

Aaron pulled his legs back to avoid the lava from burning his boots and vulnerable legs. After a few minutes they each got to their feet.

"The perfect early morning exercise regime," Aaron said, hands on his skinny hips.

But Aaron was no longer looking at the lake of lava that had just been created behind them, and instead had his attention on something else in the opposite direction. He squinted to see the shape more clearly.

It was grey-black on the top and white on its underside. It was bent over, as if split in the middle, forming an M shape. Its arms bent up and down, flapping toward the family. Its movements were broad and graceful.

"It's a bird," Cassie said. "It's beautiful. It can't be so bad here if there are birds, right?"

The bird drew closer. Its size became more apparent.

"It's huge," Zoe said. "I've never seen anything like it. It dwarfs what we have on the surface."

Bryan's own look of awe began to fade. He took a step back.

"Is it just me," he said. "Or is it getting pretty close?"

The others began to edge to the side, stepping away. The bird hardly altered its loping rhythm. It was already pressing down to greet them.

"I'm sorry guys," Bryan said. "But it looks like we're going to have to run again. Pick up your feet! Let's go!"

# 3.

THE BIRD swung down, nipping at the family's heels, stretching with the clawed toes, aiming for their exposed arms.

It screeched, something at home in the prehistoric era, and reared its oblong head back, darting forward. It seized Aaron in its beak, snapping around his ankle like the teeth of a trap.

Aaron hit the dirt and rolled onto his back. The bird pulled at him, dragging him along the ground with its huge muscles. Bryan beat on the bird's thick beak with his fist. The bird knocked him aside with a casual wave of its wing, and continued to drag Aaron along the ground.

"No!" Aaron cried.

He spun onto his front and cast about for something to grab, to grip hold of, to keep himself in place. But there was no way he was going to hold out against the bird that held him so firmly in his beak. Every time Aaron managed to dig his fingers in the earth, the bird was there to pull him away. It was too strong.

Zoe snapped off a twisted tree limb and brought her weight around, smacking the bird across the head. It made a dull thud noise on its giant hollow beak. The bird backed away, shaking its head. It lurched forward to strike back. There was a yell as Bryan swooped in.

He swung his length of wood, burying it in the bird's head with a solid *Thunk!* The bird dropped Aaron. He shook his head in surprise. Bryan could tell by the ease with which the beast had taken the blow that his attacks would have a negligible effect.

Zoe ran at the giant beast, screaming and bellowing. The bird squawked and backed away, losing its grip on Aaron. Its tiny black eyes locked on the morsel that had just been snatched from its grasp.

Cassie bent down to help Aaron to his feet. The bird squared off against the family, wings outstretched to either side. It was an intimidating sight, one it no doubt used to scare off much larger foes than the family.

It had a thick yellow crest between its eyes that ran all the way to the back of its neck. The glossy black feathers around its eyes made it look like it was peering out from a long dark tunnel.

There was no way they could stand against such a beast.

They pulled away, turning to escape. The bird tore after them in its long legged awkward gait. The family's aches and pains played on them as they attempted to pull away and outrun their pursuer.

Bryan glanced over his shoulder. The bird was insurmountable, huge, taking up his whole vision. There was no way they were going to outrun it.

*Unless…*

"This way!" Bryan said.

He turned sharp, at a ninety degree angle, leading the family alongside a thick vein of fire that spilled over a crevasse, forming a fiery waterfall. It roared and hissed as it spat red hot molten lumps over the side.

Bryan skidded to a stop. On either side of the firefall were a series of steep steps, as if cut into the incline for a giant. They would need to be careful if they were to descend.

"Down, down, down!" Bryan said.

Zoe and Cassie slid like they were attempting to make it to home base. They went over the side and gripped the edge with their fingertips. Aaron, less nimble, stopped at the edge and eased himself over. Bryan went over last, staring the giant bird down, but it wasn't to be so easily cowed, and leapt forward, clamping its beak shut. Bryan stepped back and let himself fall, catching the edge of the precipice.

As soon as his arms caught, Bryan released his grip and let himself fall the remaining distance. The others were already on the next step. Looking up, Bryan made out the giant bird.

It stood back, taking in the sight, piecing together what was happening. It turned its head left to right, exposing its weak depth of field. It needed to figure out how deep and distant the family members were. It leaned over the side, bringing its beak together, snapping for Bryan.

Bryan ducked, avoiding the jaws by inches. Now he lay on the ground. Lava spewed over the side, its burning surface glowing with white hot heat.

"You might not be afraid of me," Bryan said. "Or my stick. But how do you feel about…"

He dunked the end of the stick into the fiery river and withdrew it.

"Fire!" he said.

The flames burned brightly… for about half a second, before winking out like a damp candle wick. A sliver of smoke wisped from the stick,

wafting into the sky. Bryan looked from it to the bird, a look of embarrassment flitting across his features.

“Right,” Bryan said with a sheepish grin.

The bird lurched forward with its hornbill, long neck extending, feathers and wings stretching out to either side as it hissed in agitation.

Bryan pulled the stick back and threw it. It struck the bird on its forehead, but it was far too enraged and consumed with its target to take much notice. It barrelled down on Bryan, pressed its weight onto its stump of a leg, lost its balance and slid down onto the step below.

Bryan dived to one side, rolling over down onto the steep incline below. It was a long fall, but Zoe, Cassie and Aaron were on hand to catch him. He was too heavy and they let him drop, slowly, to the ground. The bird, out of range, honked and reached out with its huge beak, teetering over the side.

The heat blasted the family’s bare skin, sending drifts of coal dust up over them, caking them, turning them into dust devils. The family headed at a horizontal level, perpendicular to the firewall.

“I always dreamed of being bird kibble,” Bryan said with a grin.

Before he could take another step the giant bird’s beak snapped at his legs, caught his ankles, and found his pants leg. Bryan tripped over and hit the hard stone with a meaty slap.

“Euff!” Bryan said.

The bird seized him in its jaws and flapped its powerful wings, buffeting Bryan. The bird began to lift off the rock. Bryan’s body rose. He knew that once his body left the ground, he was doomed. There would be no way for him to scale his way back to the earth.

His fingertips scrabbled across the smooth flat surface, grasping for anything that might give him leverage. He found a tree root and wrapped his hand around it. The vine was tough and dug into his skin. The blood oozed between his fingers. But it held him. For now.

It was already beginning to tear away beneath his grip, its white roots coming out to say hello. Zoe, Cassie and Aaron came running over, arms outstretched to reach for Bryan, to hold him to the ground.

The roots stretched and then snapped under the pure strength of the beast. Bryan roared as he began to rise into the air. He flailed for something—anything—to hold onto, but he was already rising, rising,

rising. The bird's single good claw struggled to maintain its grip, and Bryan began to fall back toward the earth again.

Bryan's eyes alighted on a rock. If he could just get his hands to it, it might be enough to stop the bird from dragging him away. His fingertips grazed the dirt film over the rock, and his hopes soared. The bird shifted Bryan to one side and retained its grip. It flapped its powerful wings, beating the rest of the family with stinging dirt.

Bryan lifted off again. This time he bounced with his weight to force the bird down, but the bird was having none of it, and took Bryan up into the sky with upward momentum.

"No!" Bryan said. "No!"

He was rising rapidly into the air. Any higher and he wouldn't be able to descend without incurring serious harm.

There was a tearing sound. Just as Bryan looked up to see its cause, Bryan's pants ripped along the seam. He fell and made the short distance to the ground. He held out his arms, turning so his shoulder took the worst of the impact.

His head smacked the earth and made his ears ring. He didn't fall all that far, but the ground was hard and unflinching as rock. Still, Bryan was grateful to be back on solid land.

Lying flat on his back, he could make out the huge flapping form of the bird overhead. Bryan pushed himself onto his feet and ran to rejoin his family.

"Are you all right?" Zoe said. "You fell a long way."

"I'm fine," Bryan said. "I only landed on my head."

In truth, he had no idea if he was fine or not. But he could move, and his body responded to his commands. He would inspect his wounds later, when they were in a safer position.

"We'll be safe in there," Zoe said, gesturing to a short tunnel.

The bird was already descending, its single good claw stretching out to snatch its next victim. It screeched like a dozen owls coming in for the kill.

The family dived into the tunnel, the light extinguished as soon as they entered. The giant bird squawked and made a last-minute alteration, beating its wings hard to prevent itself from smashing into the wall. It floated there a moment, blasting clouds of dust into the narrow opening. It

glared at the family with its beady black eyes, before screeching and taking off.

The family's breath was loud with panting in the short corridor. They turned to look at one another and risked small smiles of relief.

"Now what do we do?" Cassie said.

"Now we wait," Zoe said. "Till the bird is gone."

"What if it never leaves?" Aaron said.

"Then we'll be waiting for a very long time," Bryan said.

# 4.

PEERING OUT, the landscape looked empty. But of course, there was no telling where the bird might be. It could have been just around the corner, waiting for someone to poke their head out. Or miles away. There was just no way of knowing.

Bryan removed his shirt and wrapped it around a long stick. He eased himself as close to the opening as he dared and then held the stick out. He waved it around, as if it was a person trying to figure out if it was safe to come out yet or not.

“It’s not there,” Zoe said.

Bryan shook his head.

“No,” he said, pulling the stick back in. “It might still be out there, perched farther away where it can’t see our decoy.”

“We could stay here,” Zoe said.

“For how long?” Bryan said.

He felt along the walls of their little cave dwelling. His hands found the thick splintered cracks there.

“Until there’s another earthquake and we get buried alive,” Bryan said. “No thanks. I’d rather take my chances out there, in the open.”

“But the bird might be out there waiting for us,” Zoe said.

“It’s a bird,” Bryan said. “It’s dumb. It will have forgotten about us by now.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Zoe said. “Some birds are known to have amazing memories.”

“One thing is for certain,” Bryan said. “We can’t stay here much longer. There’s no food or water. We either try our chances out there, or starve to death in here.”

Bryan put his shirt back on and edged out of the cave, his eyes focused on the arched roof of the entrance. He made out the rough walls and grey-brown of the rocks, and the dense dead foliage that clung like the hair to the back of an old man’s head. But there was no sign of the bird. Still, Bryan kept his eyes swivelling in their sockets, checking each nook and cranny.

Finally, he was out in the open. The rest of the family waited inside, peering out. They clutched rocks in their hands, to brandish at the bird if it made another attempt on Bryan.

“See anything?” Zoe said.

Bryan shook his head. He didn’t take his eyes off the rock face. The giant bird’s white underside would have been easy to spot against the grey-black cliff.

Bryan emerged from the left hand side. It was a vast and empty nothingness. To the right was something different to the usual blasted lands. There was an outcrop of wild vegetation. It was bushy and hard, not the kind of thing that would be easy to savor. But it might be edible, and they would need sustenance, in whatever form it took, if they were to traverse this world.

“You can come out now,” Bryan said.

The family did, while Bryan kept a close eye on their backs. A breeze rifled its fingers through the dank brown sprigs of fuzzy life. Nothing else stirred.

The family walked into the hunched bushes, each keeping an eye out, looking at the sky in a different direction. Zoe picked at the hard leaves of the bushes, sniffed them, rubbed them between her fingers, and then put them to her tongue and crushed them between her teeth.

“It’s good,” Zoe said. “Not too tasty, but safe.”

The others plucked handfuls of the dense leaves. They put them in their mouths and chewed, forming a thick paste. It wasn’t altogether unpleasant, similar in texture to mushy peas. Once they had their fill, they pressed on.

“Do you think there are a lot of these giant birds in this world?” Aaron said.

“Maybe,” Zoe said. “Why do you ask?”

“I thought birds usually hung out and hunt together,” Aaron said.

“On the surface they do,” Zoe said. “But we’re not on the surface now.”

“I know,” Aaron said. “But I would have thought behavior like that would take time to change.”

“It might do,” Zoe said. “But there’s no telling how long these birds might have been down here.”

“And if there are a lot of them, where is the food to support them?” Aaron said. “That’s part of the reason they flock together, isn’t it? That’s what the National Geographic said, anyway.”

“So what if they do usually hunt together?” Cassie said. “What difference would that make to us now?”

“Because it would mean this bird survived for a reason,” Aaron said. “It wouldn’t just be bigger and stronger than its competitors, the ones that died out, it would be smarter too.”

“So what?” Cassie said, growing agitated now. “What’s your point?”

“My point is, if it managed to survive that long by itself, it would have come up with strategies that enabled it to hunt better than most,” Aaron said.

The wisdom of Aaron’s words were just beginning to dawn on Bryan. If a super predator was to survive in a harsh environment such as this, it would need to learn to adapt, would be forced to adapt, or else die out. It would need to do things none of its predecessors had thought to do before. It would need to take calculated risks.

A chill ran through Bryan, the idea that a predator the likes of the giant bird could outwit them hadn’t occurred to him before. How would a bird outwit them? The answer struck him like a thunderbolt.

They were all looking at the sky. None of them were looking down.

As it turned out, the giant bird had long ago discovered a far more efficient form of hunting than zooming down from the sky. It liked to lay down flat on the dusty earth and shake its body, dislodging the dust and covering itself with a blanket of fine dirt. It even learned to turn its head to the side so as not to look too conspicuous, resembling a fallen log. Anything that caused movement, that came too close, that was within range, was snatched by the Humungo by jaw or claw.

Now, the family were getting awfully close.

The bird’s disguise wasn’t perfect. The dust that covered it was dishevelled, not smooth like the rest of the landmass. As Bryan traced it with his eyes, he began to work out its shape. He set his foot down. Only then did he realize what he was looking at.

That was a mistake. He should have stood perfectly still. But fate gives no prize to the those armed only with hindsight.

The dust spewed up in a torrent, dowsing the family. They stood stock still, in surprise, not knowing which way to run.

As its feathers shook and the bird revealed itself, the family came to their senses. Bryan turned and pumped his legs, throwing his arms back and forcing himself forward, eating up the landscape with broad strides.

Bryan cast a glance over his shoulders and found Zoe and Cassie right beside him.

But no Aaron.

Bryan skidded to a halt. The others followed suit. They were on the rise of a sharp ridge that overlooked a vast undulating lake of lava. It was bubbling and hot, a thin crust of black covered large swathes of it.

“Aaron!” Zoe said.

The bird was rising up a sharp incline toward the peak of the tall hill, Aaron clutched in its claw.

“No!” Aaron screamed, his fingers raking the soil. “Why is it always me?”

Zoe powered up the incline, pumping her arms and legs with energy she didn’t know she had. Her muscles ached and groaned with the effort. She crested the hill. Aaron was still clutching what little snags of nature he could find, losing them instantly. His hands were filthy with desperation.

Cassie was ahead, and reached for Aaron’s flaying hands. She was within inches of grabbing them when there was another screech, this one longer and higher pitched.

A Humungo slammed into Cassie, flashing her vision with white, knocking her down. It was on top of her, gripping her with its pair of working claws. Aaron and Cassie were swept away on a fan of feathers, carried at an awkward angle. Taking off was not as easy as it could have been.

“They’re not gone yet,” Bryan said. “You get Aaron. I’ll get Cassie.”

Zoe gripped the mangled leg of Aaron’s bird. It flapped its wings in an attempt to take off, but Zoe wouldn’t let go. Aaron pummeled the bird’s legs to get free.

Bryan dug in his heels and skidded to a halt, on the very edge of the precipice. His boot disturbed the rock balancing precariously on the cliff edge. It fell over the side and hundreds of feet to the field of lava below.

Bryan stuck his feet deeper into the soil in an effort to maintain some friction, gripping its smoky grey tail feathers. But the bird didn’t slow or stop, and simply attempted to wave Bryan off. It was only as the bird was nearing the edge that it began to realize it was not gaining at much height as it needed. All because the big human wouldn’t let go.

The bird shook itself left to right to dislodge Bryan, but he wouldn’t let go. Finally, Bryan’s right hand came loose, away with a fan of feathers,

leaving a pink bald spot on the bird's ass. The bird let out a pained squawk, but it did not stop, and only flapped harder, forcing itself into the air.

Cassie screamed and reached for her father, for his extended hand, but it was too late. There was no way they were going to make contact. The bird struggled to lift off, and lowered its legs to get more traction. Cassie's head smacked the ground, knocking her unconscious. The bird, finally, took wing.

Zoe dug in her feet too, churning up the soil like day old butter. She found little purchase, and clutched the bird's plumage with both hands, holding on like she was riding a wild stallion.

"The edge!" Aaron said. "It's going to go over the edge!"

"Then it'll have to take me with it!" Zoe said.

The bird veered dangerously close, even beginning to tilt over. Zoe's body floated on a road of air. The bird squealed, perhaps too stupid to stop, and pulled back against Zoe's weight.

"Mom, you have to let go," Aaron said.

"No," Zoe said, gritting her teeth.

"The bird can't carry both of us," Aaron said. "And it has its heart set on me. There's no way you can stop it."

Zoe still wouldn't let go.

"Then let it take me!" she said.

"It doesn't work like that," Aaron said. "Let go, otherwise it's going to take both of us."

"I can't let you go," Zoe said. "Not again."

"You'll come looking for us, just like you came looking for me before, in the water world," Aaron said. "You came for me, just as I knew you would. There isn't a force on earth—or under it—that could hold you back. That's why I know you'll come find us again. You can do it. We'll wait for you. I know you'll make it. We'll see each other again. You'll see."

Now they were dangerously near the cliff. They were going to tumble over. But Zoe had already made up her mind.

"You wait for me," she said. "We'll come for you. We both will."

"I know you will," Aaron said.

And Zoe did the hardest thing she had ever done—and for the second time too— she let her son go.

The birds went over the edge and descended, falling a dozen yards before the updraft caught them and they rose back up, rising higher and higher into the sky.

“Great start,” Bryan said.

He tossed his plucked tail feathers aside.

“It seems like wherever we go down here, someone is there to take our babies away from us,” Zoe said. “We can’t let it happen again. I won’t allow it.”

“We won’t,” Bryan said. “I promise. This will be the last time. I swear.”

But that didn’t change the fact they still had to rescue their kids this time. And God knew where they might end up.

# 5.

THE ANGRY red of the magma fields had been replaced with some semblance of nature. It was green and brown, sickly and overcast. The wind was strong and made the rags the unwilling passengers wore snap against their bare skin. The birds' feathers ruffled, blasted clean by the wind. Up here, the Humungo bird was king and sailed with the ease of millions of years of evolution.

Cassie blinked, once, slowly, and then again, slower and more deliberate. She awoke to find her body lying in a calm position, securely fastened by the bird's large claws around her waist. She started and clutched the bird's coarse claws.

The bird's large head bent down to peer at her over its huge beak. It made an annoyed hiss sound before adjusting its grip and gripping her tighter. It growled through its nostrils on the top of its beak, straightened up, and continued on with its flight.

"Nice to see you're awake," Aaron said.

Cassie arched her neck to peer right. Aaron was clutched in the second bird's claw. He looked calm and at ease.

"How long have I been out?" Cassie said.

Aaron performed a little movement with his shoulders that suggested a shrug.

"Thirty minutes," he said. "If we know roughly how fast we've been going and for how long, we might be able to figure out how far away we are."

"Which direction did we come from?" Cassie said.

Aaron pointed directly behind them.

"That's as best I can tell, anyway," he said. "It's not likely to be very reliable."

Cassie straightened up to look into the distance.

"Where are they taking us?" she said.

"I don't know," Aaron said. "But it can't be anywhere good."

"Do you think we can get free?" Cassie said.

“Free?” Aaron said. “If we get free of these birds, we’ll fall all that way. We’ll be splatters on a rock somewhere.”

“So we’re just supposed to let them take us wherever they want?” Cassie said.

“Do we have any other choice?” Aaron said. “How could we stop them?”

“I suppose we can’t,” Cassie said. “Not without killing ourselves in the process.”

“I haven’t seen any evidence of people yet,” Aaron said. “We might be the only people here. So it’s not likely anyone will come rescue us anytime soon.”

In the distance they made out the roiling bubbling magma flows where they had lost contact with their parents. Cassie felt like they were leaving Mordor. There was no way back. Not now. Cassie promised herself they would find a way out of wherever the birds would put them, no matter where it was. Even in their gullets.

They entered a thin patch of cloud. Cassie felt the dapples of icy water on her face. The birds rocked side to side, using Aaron and Cassie to shift their body weight, keeping their bodies stiff, like the arm of a pendulum.

“Aaron,” Cassie said. “What’s going on?”

“How should I know?” Aaron said. “I’m a tourist too.”

“You’re the nerd here,” Cassie said. “Out of the two of us, you’re the one most likely to be into something like birdwatching.”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Aaron said.

He wasn’t the only one. Cassie felt her stomach travel behind her like she was riding a rollercoaster. The birds threw their weight in an arc, letting their legs hang as they tumbled through the air. How many times they spun end over end, Cassie didn’t know. She didn’t care. The ground swept past several times, and then was lost as the cloud got thicker. Finally, they stopped spinning and the birds became still. They floated, flapping their wings to maintain altitude.

“What was that?” Cassie said after waiting a minute to make sure she could speak without throwing up.

The clouds began to dissipate, revealing Aaron holding his insides and hanging his head. The birds pumped their wings and took the kids higher. The air was thinner here and made breathing difficult. After a few breaths, they acclimatized.

They rose above the clouds to find a huge landmass jutting into the sky. It was a mountain, big, black and carved from some kind of glassy volcanic rock. It was like something from a nightmare. There was little sign of life, save a sprinkling of trees.

It was the tallest mountain in the world. The birds flapped their wings lazily and rose up its enormous peak. There was another strata of cloud, this one thick, damp and chill. The birds breached it, the mist clinging to their feathers, trailing them as they arched higher, approaching the cold tip of the mountain.

They came to an enormous nest, the biggest the world had ever seen. A platform large enough for a full size house to rest on. Rocks and tree branches decorated its base.

It had been assembled from every corner of the world. There were lumps of wood from old buildings, crossbeams and walls of removable units, and charred rocks from the blasted lands, and plants and flowers harvested from cracks in the walls.

The Humungo birds flapped their wings and extended their legs, tossing their charges into the nest. Their flaps sent up powerful gusts of wind that snapped and encircled Aaron and Cassie.

“I think we’re about to be lunch,” Cassie said.

Aaron gibbered.

The two large birds peered down at them with their beady eyes, turning their heads to one side to peer at them more closely. They hissed and hawked, and then shuffled their feathers, like henchmen preparing to fight. They hopped on the spot and jumped into the nest, chasing after Aaron and Cassie, who stood up and backed away.

The birds never got very close to them. Clearly that wasn’t their intention, only to frighten and cajole. Then, just as quickly as their aggressive stance had started, they stood up, flapped their wings, and rose into the air.

Cassie and Aaron, panting and out of breath, both from the fear and lack of oxygen, got shakily to their feet. The birds shrank into the distance, flying away rapidly.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Aaron said.

“Only if you don’t mind becoming an aperitif,” Cassie said.

Aaron turned to peer at their surroundings. The nest walls were four feet high and encircled them on every side. The coarse wood had been bent into

shape with brute strength. Aaron's eyes widened at what he saw lined up along one side.

He reached for Cassie without taking his eyes off the sight. He tapped Cassie on the arm.

"What?" Cassie said.

Aaron pointed.

"Oh," Cassie said.

Standing before them, almost as tall as they were high, were half a dozen giant bird eggs.

# 6.

BRYAN BENT over double and braced his knees on his hands. He could not take another step. Not if he didn't want to collapse flat on his face, anyway.

"Bryan, what's up?" Zoe said, jogging over to him.

The fact she could speak without gasping for air only went to further show the disparity between them regarding their athletic prowess.

"We can't just sit here," Zoe said. "Not while they're still out there, alone."

"They're… not alone…" Bryan gasped. "They have…"

"Each other," Zoe completed. "You really should get into shape, Bryan."

"I will," Bryan said, puffing. "As soon as…"

"We get back," Zoe said, rolling her eyes. "That's *if* we ever get back."

"We… We will," Bryan said. "Just… give me… give me a minute…"

They'd been running ever since the kids had been taken from them, what must have been an hour or more. They hadn't taken a rest nor a break. Bryan was sure he'd already had three heart attacks. He had never been the best long distance runner.

"We don't have a minute," Zoe said. "Get up. Come on."

"At least… the landscape… is giving us… a bit of… a break," Bryan said.

The magma landscape had begun breaking about a mile back, gradually fading out and replaced by dense brown scrubland. It was hardly a national park, but it was better than where they'd started.

"Well, one thing's for sure," Bryan said.

"What's that?" Zoe said

"There are people here," Bryan said.

"What makes you say that?" Zoe said.

"The roads," Bryan said, nodding. "They were caused by people, horses and carts. These kinds of double row tracks don't exist elsewhere in nature."

Zoe supposed he was right. But the tracks looked more than a little overgrown with lack of use.

“We could follow the tracks,” Bryan said. “That way we can ask them if they know where the birds usually go.”

“They were taken by birds,” Zoe said. “They’re unlikely to be underground.”

“They’re alien birds,” Bryan said. “There’s no way we can know where they went, what they eat, their habits…”

Zoe shook her head.

“We’re never going to find them,” she said.

“We will,” Bryan said. “You’ll see.”

“You don’t know that,” Zoe said. “You can’t know that.”

“I do know that,” Bryan said. “Because we’re a family and we stick together, no matter what. We will find them, or they will find us. Because that’s what families do. We’ve been through a lot, and they know how to take care of themselves.”

“I know,” Zoe said, leaning her head against Bryan’s chest. “But I still don’t feel good about them being alone.”

“Of course you don’t,” Bryan said, wrapping his arm around Zoe’s shoulders. “I don’t either. That’s what makes you a great parent.”

“A great parent wouldn’t have lost them in the first place,” Zoe said.

“We didn’t lose them,” Bryan said. “Birds took them away. How were we to know a bird of that size a, existed, and b, would sweep down on us from nowhere?”

“You’re right,” Zoe said. “But they’re still our babies.”

Bryan shook his head.

“But they’re not our babies anymore,” he said. “They’re not children. I know we think of them like that, but that doesn’t make it right. Eventually we have to let them go and do these kinds of things by themselves. That’s our real responsibility—preparing our kids for the hardships they’ll face out in the world.”

“I know,” Zoe said, shaking her head. “I don’t recall ever seeing pictures of giant birds taking kids away in the Parenting Handbook. Which chapter was that under?”

“I guess it must have been removed in later editions,” Bryan said.

Zoe smiled, but it was distracted. She was too concerned with the kids’ disappearance to think clearly.

“Come on,” Zoe said. “We have to keep going if we’re going to stand a chance of finding them.”

Bryan puffed through his lips and set off at a trot. He immediately had to double it as Zoe tore off ahead of him. He wished the birds had taken him instead of the kids. At least then he wouldn’t need to be tortured like this.

# Rosetta #2

“WHERE ARE they?” Rosetta said.

“They left,” Admiral said. “What would you be looking to do with them if you did find them?”

“I’m not looking to hurt them, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Rosetta said. “I got pulled under the earth by the sinkhole too. I was looking, digging for Bryan, when the ground opened up and swallowed me.”

Admiral didn’t look like he believed her. Rosetta didn’t much care if he did or not.

“Look, I let you capture me so I could get the information I needed,” Rosetta said. “I came here to find them, and that’s what I’m going to do. Instead, you’ve brought me here to a castle for God knows what reason.”

“You let us capture you?” Admiral said, shaking his head. “I wish we had you sooner. The pirates have a weak spot for anyone with a missing limb. You would have been a goddess amongst them.”

“A goddess?” Rosetta said, a look of distaste registering. “Thanks, but I’ve worn that hat, bought that T-shirt.”

“T-shirt?” Admiral said.

“Look,” Rosetta said, holding out her hands to get some control over her emotions. “I just want to know where they went. I work with Bryan. He’s my boss. I want to make sure they’re okay, to help them return to the surface any way I can.”

Admiral looked her up and down.

“Yes,” he said. “I believe you.”

*Finally.*

“So, where are they?” Rosetta said.

“No idea,” Admiral said.

Rosetta’s shoulders slumped.

“But I know where they left this world,” Admiral said with a grin. “Before we go there, I need to take you to see the king.”

# 7.

PEERING OVER the side was akin to looking over the precipice of a rollercoaster at a theme park. The world seemed to turn on the spot and revolve, spinning. The mist was thirty feet away, swirling thickly. Aaron couldn't see much through it, save the distant rolling landscape beyond.

"How high do you think we are?" Cassie said.

"Above the clouds?" Aaron said. "Pretty high, I'd say."

He pick up a rock and tossed it over the side. It disappeared into the mist, clacked, and then rolled down the mountainside. They had no idea how far it had traveled, but it was clearly a long way.

"It's not so bad up here," Aaron said. "We've got some food, a way to make a fire. We can survive up here until our parents come find us."

"If you think I'm staying up here till then, you've got another thing coming," Cassie said.

"What do you want to do?" Aaron said. "We're miles up a mountain and there's no way down but to climb. And we don't have any of the tools we need."

"Then we'll have to make do with what we can get our hands on," Cassie said.

She bent down to begin picking up items the birds had used to build their nest with. A great deal of it was too large for them to maneuver easily. Some items they could use to climb down the mountain, including tough vines to fashion into harnesses, and sharp rocks as sharpened tools.

Cassie picked up a sharpened length of metal and handed another to Aaron. He tucked it in his pants.

The eggs didn't move. They were giant monoliths, undisturbed, strange objects, but there was nothing dangerous about them. The parent birds hadn't returned from wherever it was they had gone yet. As large as they were, they probably ranged for miles around.

"The birds left us alive," Aaron said. "Maybe they want us to play with the chicks when they hatch, or something."

Cassie tugged on a line, checking its strength.

“Are you so naive?” she said. “Haven’t you ever seen the Discovery Channel? Birds put things like us in their nest so their chicks can eat them.”

“I think that’s spiders,” Aaron said.

“That puts me at ease,” Cassie said, rolling her eyes.

“But they haven’t hatched yet,” Aaron said.

“Yet,” Cassie said. “Once they do, we’re dead.”

“But they’re only little chicks,” Aaron said. “What harm can they do us?”

“Little chicks?” Cassie said. “Have you even seen these eggs? Look at them. Do you think you could pick one of these up at the local grocery store?”

“It’d make a great omelette,” Aaron said.

“These things aren’t normal,” Cassie said. “This is a monster. A chicken’s egg can do us no harm, a duck’s egg can do us no harm, a giganotosaurus egg—or whatever this thing is—will tear us to pieces.”

“Most birds don’t eat meat,” Aaron said, resorting to his final argument. “These birds have beaks, not sharp pointy teeth.”

“Again, I draw your attention to the sheer size of these creatures,” Cassie said. “They could bludgeon us to death. And once they hatch there will be no escaping them. We’ll be trapped in this nest with them. I don’t know about you, but my hide and seek skills are a little rusty. I doubt if I could escape them for long in a place like this. That’s why we have to get out of here. Fast.”

# 8.

BRYAN WAS looking at a giant crater in the wall. It looked like a chunk of the earth had been torn out by a huge monstrous beast. It hadn't been the first they had seen, but the seventh. After every half mile they ran, they came across another one, just as big and ominous as the last. Red hot lava seeped from the edges like bleeding wounds, dribbling across the landscape.

"What do you think caused these fissures?" Bryan said.

"Looks like it could be some kind of explosion," Zoe said.

"Explosion?" Bryan said. "Like with dynamite?"

"Natural gas would be my guess," Zoe said. "All it would take is for a stray spark, and the gas would ignite. That would be enough to rent huge holes in the walls like this."

"My God," Bryan said.

"And look," Zoe said. "They carry on all the way down the wall, like a chain. I just hope we'll be out of here before the whole world ends up this way."

"What do you mean?" Bryan said.

"Look at the walls," Zoe said. "See there, were the fissure is especially deep? That's like getting a wound in your body, and it's so deep there is internal damage and bleeding."

"So what are you saying?" Bryan said. "That this world is going to bleed to death?"

"In essence, yes," Zoe said. "The magma is the blood, and it will choke this world. We've already seen it take one part of the world—the blasted lands, the area where we first arrived. That is what will happen to the rest of this world, only on a much larger scale."

"Wow," Bryan said.

"How many more of these worlds are there, do you think?" Zoe said.

"Who knows," Bryan said. "But they can't be infinite. There is only so much space in the Earth's crust."

"That's a reassuring thought," Zoe said.

"You know me," Bryan said. "Mr. Positive."

“Dante wrote about seven hells,” Zoe said. “Maybe he came down here too.”

“Seven?” Bryan said. “I sure hope not. I’m not sure I could survive seven of these places.”

Zoe drew to a stop and stood staring at something in the middle of the clearing.

She was looking at an assortment of rocks, one on top of another like gorgeous natural wind-blown pieces of art where the rocks are wide at the bottom and small at the top.

But with one exception.

These rocks had gaps between them. They were floating, like a child’s mobile, without the strings. The pieces moved around in a circle, never touching, coming close, and then gently pushing off one another.

“What is this?” Bryan said. “Some kind of art installation?”

“In the middle of nowhere?” Zoe said. “Do you think that’s very likely?”

“I guess not,” Bryan said. “It’s only the middle of nowhere at the moment. In the past it may have been the center of a metropolis.”

“That’s very philosophical of you,” Zoe said.

Bryan reached out and tentatively touched one of the rocks. There was something like an electrical charge that made the hairs rise on the back of his hand. The rock spun in the air and began to revolve around the other rocks.

“Setting it on a new path,” Zoe said.

“Now who’s being philosophical?” Bryan said.

“Only stating the facts,” Zoe said.

Bryan wrapped his arms around her and watched the eternal piece of artwork before them. The rock Bryan had touched was still spinning in its own little orbit. It came close to the other rocks and got kicked aside. It spun and struck another rock, which in turn was spat out of its delicate orbit and almost struck Bryan and Zoe in the chest.

They dived aside, taking refuge behind a large boulder. The rocks smacked the ground and bounced over their shield.

They sat stock still for a moment.

“You had to touch it,” Zoe said.

Bryan shrugged.

“I couldn’t help myself,” he said.

“Try,” Zoe said.

She put her face slowly around the boulder. The piece of artwork was no more. It filled Zoe with dread to see that, the fact they had come and had a powerful influence, making something disappear from this world.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t to be the last thing they would have such an effect on.

# 9.

THE PARENT birds returned before long and deposited a dozen items in the floor of the nest. The vast majority was garbage. It was not delicious food, barely even edible. Nothing that would keep Cassie and Aaron for long.

There was some meat, one side of a severed snout. They might make something of it if they were forced to. They had to assume there was nothing in the mist to support them. Cassie picked what remained of the unfortunate creature up, wrapped it in dry leaves, and added it to her pack.

The adult birds preened one another's feathers with delicate, but firm, movements. The next time the birds took off Aaron and Cassie would attempt their escape. It would be the only opportunity they would get.

Every few minutes Cassie darted a look at the eggs, half expecting them to break open, for the demons inside to spill out and consume her. They were going to be unstoppable monsters, raging beasts with sharp pointy teeth and armored backs. They would not be able to do anything with them, would not be able to hold them back, would not even be able to hide from them for long. Cassie fully intended on being far from the nest when they decided to present themselves to the world.

In the meanwhile, Cassie and Aaron prepared their items for their climb down the mountain. If they were going to make the attempt, it would be the best they could do with the resources available to them.

Something set the parent birds off. They fluttered and hopped on the spot, cheeping and chirruping, flapping their wings in excitement. They nipped at one another before taking off to hunt in another location. At least the love was still alive in some parts of the world.

"Happy hunting," Cassie said.

She turned to Aaron.

"Are you ready?" Cassie said.

"Not really," Aaron said with a grim expression.

"Help me first," Cassie said.

She turned and got down on her knees before him. Aaron picked up the materials they'd made and began to slip them on Cassie's slender frame.

He affixed the straps, holding the small amount of food and water on her back. Next, Aaron took position and Cassie loaded him with his climbing gear. When Aaron stood, they wore matching acorn helmets. They could only imagine the size the acorns must have been.

“How is it you know how to climb?” Aaron said.

“Summer camp,” Cassie said.

“Nice to see how the other half lives,” Aaron said under his breath.

“Have you done anything like this before?” Cassie said.

“Yes,” Aaron said. “I used to climb onto the roof of the house whenever I kicked a ball up there by accident. Definitely nothing of this size.”

“Me neither,” Cassie said. “But if we take our time we might be able to make our way down in one piece.”

“I like your confidence,” Aaron said.

Just off center of the nest was a thick stub of wood with a misshapen hook jutting out of it. What it had originally been, they had no idea, but they were pleasantly surprised to find it there. They wrapped vines around it, locking it down tight, and then tossed their ropes over the side of the nest. The vines fell into the mist, disappearing from view.

“After you,” Aaron said.

Cassie’s eyes narrowed.

“Coward,” she said.

Aaron held up his hands.

“I’m just being a gentleman,” he said.

“A gentleman,” Cassie said with a snort. “But still a coward.”

Cassie held onto her rope and threw her legs over the side. She descended arm over arm to the mist ten feet below. She slowed as she approached the mist, hesitant about entering a world where she wouldn’t be able to see much farther than a few inches in front of her nose. Anything could be in there. *And nothing too,* a little voice said. *In fact, probably nothing.*

Cassie held her breath and lowered herself into oblivion. She was submerged instantly. She held herself in position with her legs and waved a hand in front of her face. If she wasn’t the one waving it, she wouldn’t have known it was there.

She turned on her vine, taking in the mist around her. There wasn’t one thin spot. Aaron’s boots skidded on the mountainside. Cassie couldn’t imagine he was the most agile climber in the world.

Aaron drew up alongside her.

“Thick in here, isn’t it?” he said.

“Is it obvious comment time?” Cassie said. “You should have warned me.”

“I’m not sure I can do this,” Aaron said. “My arms are shaking.”

“Lock your legs on either side of the vine,” Cassie said. “That way you can stop and rest anytime you need to.”

“Thanks,” Aaron said. “That works.”

“No need to say not to look down,” Cassie said. “You can’t see anything even if you did.”

“But that’s scary too,” Aaron said. “We don’t know what’s in it.”

“Are you okay?” Cassie said. “We’ll get through this mist. We’ll just need to take it slow. We’ll be on the ground before we know it. Then we’ll find Mom and Pop and that’ll be the end of our little adventure in this world. All we’ll have to do then is focus on finding the Passage. The sooner we get started, the sooner we can get out of here.”

Cassie unfurled her muscles and began to edge down the vine, one hand at a time, moving in synchronicity with her legs. Down, down, down deeper into the mist. It looked the same no matter how far they went, endless sheets of white.

Cassie felt the keen sting of ice against her skin, the vine slippery in her hands. Cassie actually liked the freshness of the air and the cold vapor. She continued to place one hand over the other until her muscles ached and she slowed to a stop.

“Aaron?” Cassie said. “Are you there?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” Aaron said.

He sounded a little higher than Cassie, like he needed to come down a little farther if he was going to speak to her on an equal level. He kept coming, slowly, until he drew up to her. Cassie still couldn’t see him. He was out of sight behind the veil of mist.

“We’ll be out of the mist soon,” Cassie said, though in reality she had no idea how long it would take to remove themselves from this place.

She shuddered at the thought the mist might never end. And then another idea struck her. The worst she could envision at that moment. What if there was something else in the mist with them? Something they couldn’t see, couldn’t fight? Almost immediately she began to think she could hear something in the fog.

Suddenly she didn’t want to stay, didn’t want to be there another moment longer than they needed to be. Entering the mist was the worst idea they could have come up with. How could they have been so stupid?

But they were here now, already halfway through the process.

“Woah,” Aaron’s voice said. “Is that you?”

“Is what me?” Cassie said.

“The thing touching my legs,” Aaron said.

“You should be so lucky,” Cassie said. “I wouldn’t touch your legs if you paid me.”

“All right,” Aaron said. “You just needed to say it’s not you. There’s no need to get personal.”

“Sorry,” Cassie said. “But no. It’s not me. Come on. We have to keep going. The sooner we get on the other side of this mist, the better.”

They continued to climb, lowering themselves one hand length at a time. It was a strain on their muscles, difficult, hard work, but they didn’t stop.

And then Cassie felt something brushing against her ankle. She rolled her eyes.

“Real mature, Aaron,” Cassie said.

“You’re the one making childish comments,” Aaron said.

“So you feel the need to touch me the way you’re touching yourself?” Cassie said.

“I’m not touching you,” Aaron said. “You’re telling me you feel it too?”

“There’s nothing to feel, besides your sick hands,” Cassie said.

“Cassie, I’m not touching you,” Aaron said. “How can I? I’m over here, and I can’t even see you.”

Cassie stiffened when she felt something graze her bum. She slapped Aaron’s hand.

“What did I tell you?” Cassie said. “I swear, I’m going to call the sexual harassment police when we get home.”

“What was I supposed to have done now?” Aaron said.

“You know what you did,” Cassie said.

“No, I don’t,” Aaron said. “It wasn’t me!”

“You grabbed my ass!” Cassie said.

“And you think I have the confidence to do something like that?” Aaron said. “Even if I did, I couldn’t do it to you. It’d be weird. We’re like brother and sister now.”

Taking a moment to think about it, Cassie supposed that was true. Aaron wasn't capable of such a thing. She felt the same way with him. He was like a younger brother, though they were actually the same age.

That left only one logical answer.

But that couldn't be true. Could it? What could possibly be in this mist? And what were the chances it was something that wanted to touch her the way it had?

There were living things in all these worlds they had visited. Some they had seen before, others were new to them, thought to be extinct. Others had evolved of their own accord, like the huge birds that had brought them to this nest. Was it so unreasonable for there to be living things in this mist too?

And then she felt something that could not have been Aaron's hands.

It began from the heel of her foot and wound its way around her legs and up her body, all the time keeping contact with her. It sent a shiver up her spine, making her feel sick to the stomach.

It would have required someone with a remarkably long arm to be able to do that, a basketball player, perhaps. But what were the chances Michael Jordan was inside this mist with them? Not very.

Terrified and unable to move, hardly able even to breathe, Cassie tensed her whole body, and let the feeling of whatever was running over her complete its assessment. Perhaps it would leave her alone, sensing she wasn't what it—whatever it was—was looking for.

She was helpless prey deep in the jungle, trapped within the mortal coils of a dangerous predator. It was going to crush and destroy her, she knew. It was the kind of forethought and knowledge she imagined all prey had before the big crush.

It ran around her body to her neck, and she felt the icy dampness of its scales on her skin. She was paralysed with fear, the way only prey could feel when they were in the clutches of a predator.

It was a predator, Cassie knew. It was in the way it moved, the confident manner with which it approached her body, pressing and prying on all sides, sizing her up, judging whether she was a suitable meal or not. It was the reason her hair stood on end the way it was, the way her body had become rigid and stiff, terrified, her every sense heightened for a fight or flight response.

She was suddenly aware of everything around her, everything in motion. There was nothing she couldn't miss, for to miss the slightest signal of danger would have meant death.

The skin that brushed against her wasn't something a healthy human should have anywhere near their body, unless Aaron had a particularly bad rash he hadn't told her about.

Cassie was grasping at straws, her mind working on overdrive to discover something that might explain the facts, without admitting the truth. A creature was wrapping itself around her, and she had no doubt in her mind as to what it could be.

Its coils were thick and powerful, and there was little she could do to get loose, she knew. She had made a fatal mistake; she had waited too long, and with too much hope for a chance the beast might not be interested in her after all. But unfortunately for her, it did want her. There was nothing she could do now. She could already feel the oxygen being squeezed from her body.

A shape began to appear from the mist. Its head was an arrowhead, narrow at the nose and broad at the jaw. Its eyes were yellow as the waxing moon, slitted and evil. The mist parted as the snake's head drew closer.

It was an ugly specimen, with a scar across its thick lips. Its tongue lolled out of its mouth and quivered in the air, revealing one of its forks was missing. It kissed her cheek. Cassie shivered in its coils, causing the snake to tighten further.

Cassie giggled. Where that came from, she didn't know. Inside, she was terrified.

Aaron was saying something. She could hear his voice, but it was on the fringes of her understanding. It was like he was speaking to her through a watery barrier. He may as well have not existed at all.

But the snake, the huge reptile, its head larger than Cassie's own, was real. To Cassie's eyes it may as well have been all that existed in the universe. It was everything that mattered. She couldn't make out Aaron's words. She didn't need to. They didn't matter. The snake's slitted amber yellow eyes glowed, beautiful, dangerous and deadly.

Cassie's mind began to wander. It was then that she was really in danger. There was something mesmerizing about the snake, something that lulled Cassie into a false sense of security. She thought about the birds and all the food they brought to the nest. It must have attracted a great deal of

pests, and that was what she supposed was wrapping around her body now. The world's worst pest.

The quantity of food, the size and quality of it, would have dictated what kind of pests they could expect. Bird seed in a cage attracted rats. Dog meat attracted raccoons. Fully grown swine and chickens and other carcasses the fully grown birds must have brought to the nest at various times… What kind of pests might they attract? Now she knew.

A stiff breeze blew a hole in the mist, exposing the snake and the surrounding rocks, the pedestal upon which the nest was perched. Daylight brought the nightmare to life, and it was this break in the spell, of the spectral reality of the situation, that awoke Cassie, warning her of the danger she was in.

She peered down at this creature, not wanting to see it, but unable to tear her eyes away from it either. The dissipating mist brought the creature's head further into view, its slitted eyes wide and unyielding black pupils, moving to and fro.

Cassie was mesmerised by it. But over the slimy wet scales of its head Cassie could make out Aaron. She shifted her eyes ever so slightly away from the reptile and focused on him. She began to breathe once again, and could feel with terrifying precision the snake crushing the air from her body. Its grip somehow, incredibly, grew stronger, and though she grunted, the air was crushed from Cassie's lungs.

"Aaron," she said, the name escaping her lips in a gasping wheeze.

She found part of her lungs were no longer available to draw in the required amount of oxygen. She was starving to death, starving of oxygen.

She was going to die.

The snake's thick tongue flickered between its thick lips and tickled Cassie's nose. The snake's head pulled back, its lips receded, revealing its fangs. They stuck out at a ninety degree angle, large, like the kind of needle used to inject adrenaline directly into the heart. Its eyes rolled back in expectation of the upcoming feast.

It was going to crush and consume her, Cassie knew. This was the end. And yet strangely, bizarrely, she didn't really mind. She was numb. She felt her bones rubbing together. They weren't yet broken, but she could feel the snake preparing to bring all its strength down on her, to snap and crush her bones and ground them into dust.

Its head jerked to one side and snapped its attention around, turning to find Aaron hanging from his vine, a club in one hand. He had just struck the giant snake on the head. The wind had not only awoken Cassie to the horror situation she was in, but also allowed Aaron to see the scene for himself. It had not been to his liking, and he'd decided to do something about it.

The snake hissed, its injured tongue flicking, fork jittering like a rattlesnake's tail. It ducked its head down and looked up at him. Though Aaron had the higher ground, there was no denying which of the parties held the greater number of cards. Thankfully Aaron wasn't ignorant of the situation. His eyes widened. He couldn't tear his eyes off the snake, but he managed to open his mouth and some words tumbled out.

"Cassie!" he said. "Run!"

It was hardly the most accurate command. How exactly did you run up a vine? His brain hadn't managed to find the right word and simply plucked the nearest one at hand. *Climb. I have to climb.*

There was no way to get free. The snake's thick coils were wrapped around her torso, pinning her arms to her sides. Its other coils hung from protruding rocks, natural hooks and crannies.

The thrust of the command was good. Escape. Get out of there. Cassie shook her head. Aaron had already begun to climb his vine, gripping his makeshift club between his teeth and pulling himself up one arm at a time. The snake reached for his vine and coiled itself around it, heading up and chasing Aaron as he pulled himself up faster than Cassie would have believed him capable.

The snake's coils were weakening. Cassie was very aware of them, how they clung to her, tight and unyielding. But they were loosening, and soon they would be loose enough for Cassie to begin climbing. But she had to wait, or else risked alerting the snake she was still there, within its grasp.

She would have one chance to get away, and she needed to be patient. Her breaths were shallow, hollow and crisp in her chest. She felt another coil unwind from her, and the snake's tail fell, dangling from Aaron's vine.

Aaron must have been close to the nest by now, but she wouldn't know his fate until she reached the nest.

Cassie's muscles were free. She began her ascent. She bathed in the luxuriousness of the freedom of her own muscles, operating under her own

steam. She lifted up a hand and felt the vine there. She began to lift herself up. It was hard work, her muscles frozen by inactivity.

A noise. Cassie froze. Listened.

Nothing came from the mist.

She listened more intently, for the possibility of hearing a voice. Aaron's voice. But it didn't come. That didn't mean he wasn't in trouble.

She reached up and continued to climb. It seemed a lot farther to climb on the way up than it did on the way down. She let her sweat slicken her brow and dampen her fringe. She paused to take a break and breathed in the icy cold of the misty air. It was cool and damp and felt good.

Funny she was so high, floating above the craggy rocks on a single vine rope. One slip and she would be dead. She would fall and that would be the end of her story. For the first time since she and Aaron had begun their descent, Cassie realized how reckless they had been. Who climbed into an abyss not knowing what was there?

Prepare, yes. But they had had time. They could have waited. And when they couldn't wait any longer, when a large hungry mouth wanted to eat them, when the parent birds had gotten bored of them, or just wanted to kill them, for whatever reason, that was the time to jump headlong into the abyss. Not when they still had time.

From now on they would stay in the nest and come up with another way to escape, or else a way to get a message to their parents to inform them where they were. Cassie reached up and grabbed another vine.

She instantly regretted it.

It jerked, moving beneath her hand. It was cold and squirmed in her grip. She pulled her hand back immediately, wishing she could take back what she'd just done. But it was too late.

The snake would be coming back to confront her, from above. There would be no avoiding it. And she did the unthinkable. She reached up, gripped the snake, and pulled on it. It was already pushing itself down the vine toward her, and if it hadn't been for this added momentum, Cassie would never have been able to dislodge the giant snake from its perch. But it was, and she did. The snake fell into the mist, sprawling end over end.

Cassie wouldn't wait this time. She would rush. She seized the vine and pulled herself up. As she ascended, pulling herself up faster than she had ever moved before, she thought she made something out through the swirling mist.

Something hissed beside her head, but there was no way she was going to slow down now, not while she was making good time. She pushed on, forcing herself up one handhold at a time. She wouldn't stop. Not for anything.

Before she knew it, the mist began to grow thin. The vine beneath her hands shivered and shook as the snake on her heels began to pick up speed, catching up to her. But she wouldn't slow.

Cassie's fingers brushed the pointed sticks of the nest. The vine was pulled taut. It was difficult to maintain a solid grip, unable to wrap her hands around it. Cassie checked each branch and protrusion to ensure it was strong enough to hold her weight before letting herself hang suspended.

She was going to make it!

She reached up to grip the nest's side and pull herself up…

Except she couldn't.

Something was wrapped about her ankle, tight like it meant to choke off her circulation.

"No!" Cassie said.

The snake was powerful and heavy. She kicked with her trapped foot and struck out with her free foot. Her hands were already beginning to slip, losing their grip.

"Cassie!" Aaron said, running over to her.

The relief was palpable in Aaron's voice, even stronger in Cassie's eyes. She didn't want to be alone right then, not when she was so close to escaping to safety.

"A snake!" Cassie said. "It's got me! It's got my leg!"

Aaron grabbed Cassie's arms and pulled on them. But the snake was too powerful and there was no way they were going to get it loose.

Cassie's eyes widened at the sight behind Aaron. He turned, slowly, to peer behind himself. It was one of the Humungo birds. It looked at them, cocking its head inquisitively to one side.

*Oh great*, Cassie thought. *Just what we need!*

"Hold on!" Aaron said. "Hold on!"

"Don't leave me!" Cassie said.

Aaron was already moving away, to the center of the nest where the vines were still attached. He bent down and untied the other end.

Cassie's eyes widened.

“What are you doing?” she said. “You’re trying to kill me?”

Aaron didn’t say anything. He stood on the vine, pressing his weight onto it. Then he bent down and picked up the other end of the vine. He held it up, waving it at the bird and shouted, “Hey! Hey!”

The Humungo bird hopped from one foot to the other. It didn’t seem to know what to do. Aaron held up his hand with the vine, shut his eyes, and turned his head away. He didn’t want to see what was about to happen. The bird stopped shuffling from side to side and stared down at the flimsy end of the vine. At a certain angle it might have resembled a giant worm or even… A snake?

The snake attached to Cassie’s ankle seemed to grow heavier. Cassie was losing her grip. She couldn’t hold on much longer. She lost one hand, but threw it back up almost immediately. She was going to get pulled over the side any second if Aaron’s plan didn’t work out. Her fingertips bit deep into the sharp detritus of the nest’s building materials.

The giant bird’s head snapped forward, striking the flimsy vine. Aaron cried out, snatching back his own hand. Cassie was no longer holding the vine, but felt it slide beneath her as the bird pulled on it.

“Grab it!” Aaron shouted.

The plan made sense to Cassie the moment he shouted those words. She took up the vine, clutching it between her two hands.

The bird stepped back and pulled Cassie up over the side of the nest. Cassie crashed onto the nest’s floor. There was a red lash mark, a deep scratch where the snake’s tail had clung to Cassie in its fierce embrace. But now the snake lay beside her.

The bird, having seemingly mistaken the vine for a snake, now spied the snake and snatched it up before it could awaken from its dazed state.

Aaron staggered to Cassie, falling to his knees beside her. Cassie looked him over. He was white as a sheet, clutching his arm close to his chest.

“Aaron, are you okay?” Cassie said.

“I’ll be fine,” Aaron said. “The bird wrenched it, that’s all. It’ll be fine in a few hours.”

Cassie hugged him.

“Thank you,” she said. “I don’t know what I’d have done if you hadn’t come.”

Aaron shrugged.

“It’s no more or less than you would have done,” he said.

Sleep found them easily. They lay back on the nest, and though it was actually thorny and sharp like nettles, it felt soft as a cloud to their weary backs. They snored, their aching muscles sore and pained, their bodies settling down to begin healing themselves.

They were much too tired to notice as Aaron’s vine, still staked to the nest, began to twitch.

# 10.

NIGHT DESCENDED over the world and the stars came out to play. They were a sporadic mishmash, clumped together in small groups in one area, and stretching across vast empty expanses to another. Constellations unlike anything seen on the face of the surface's night sky.

Bryan and Zoe nursed the blisters on the soles of their feet, wrapping bandages of thin leaves around them to staunch the blood, pus and pain. They had persevered through the pain at Zoe's behest and her imposed pace. She seemed intent on setting some kind of record in crossing this world.

"You always said I ought to get in shape," Bryan said, sliding his sodden socks back on with care.

"But it took coming all the way down here before you listened to me," Zoe said.

"Better late than never," Bryan said.

Zoe didn't reply.

"Or so they say," Bryan grumbled to himself.

Zoe wouldn't slow down for Bryan, and that had made him angry. He had done his best to keep up with her. He hadn't said anything, and instead buried it deep inside himself, focusing his discontent into driving his legs forward.

He thought he'd done rather well, but Zoe hadn't uttered a single word of encouragement. Any pace he could go was not fast enough in her eyes, and each time she began to pull away from him she had to slow down so he could catch up.

"You know, getting to Aaron and Cassie earlier by a few hours isn't likely to make that much difference," Bryan said.

"Every minute matters," Zoe said. "We need to get to them as quickly as possible. What if we get there just after they get eaten, or something else we could have prevented?"

"Then we would always be late before something happens," Bryan said.

"That's why we should never be late," Zoe said.

Bryan picked up a pair of dead rats he'd skewered on sticks.

“Are you sure you don’t want one of these?” he said.

“You’re not seriously going to eat them?” Zoe said.

“Sure I am,” Bryan said. “You don’t give up quality roadkill like this.”

“I thought you were joking!” Zoe said.

“I never joke about food,” Bryan said.

“Unless it’s good for you,” Zoe said. “I notice you don’t mind joking about it then. And then not eat it.”

“You’re just jealous,” Bryan said.

“Of what?” Zoe said.

“Of my constitution,” Bryan said.

Zoe threw her head back and barked a laugh.

“That’ll be the day,” she said. “How are you going to cook them, anyway? We don’t have anything to start a fire with.”

Bryan shook his head.

“You poor uninspired simpleton,” he said.

He lay beside a thin stream of bubbling magma. He extended the rats and let them hang lazily over it. The rising heat sizzled the flesh, the fat dribbling. Bryan smiled at Zoe with a triumphant grin. Zoe rolled her eyes. She sat up and hugged her knees close to herself.

“I’ve seen Aaron almost every day since his birth, and now, to be away from him…” she said, shaking her head. “I don’t think I’ve ever been away from him for so long.”

They looked up at the stars. The constellations were still strange to them both, like cultures of bacteria, bunched together in some areas, and wide spaces between them to the next colony.

“We’ll find him again,” Bryan said. “Both of them. You’ll see.”

The meat cooked and smelled good. Bryan brought them to his mouth. He blew to cool them, opened his mouth to bite on a hind leg, saliva already flowing.

“The rats down here probably have something wrong with them,” Zoe said. “The plague. Or some other illness. Why else would they be lying dead on the side of the road the way they were?”

Bryan paused.

“Yeah, right,” he said.

“Stands to reason, don’t you think?” Zoe said.

Bryan eyed the rats. Now he couldn’t look at them without thinking of deadly bacteria. He shook his head, sighed, and tossed them into the

magma stream.

“You really know how to take the fun out of life, you know that?” he said.

“I’ve got more than enough salad to go round, if you want some,” Zoe said.

Bryan sighed.

“Endless exercise and rabbit food,” he said. “We really are in hell.”

# 11.

CASSIE'S DREAMS were filled with slithering ugly beasts with split lips and missing forked tongues. The world was consumed with them. One snake wrapping around each of her limbs, and then a final black one with glowing yellow eyes slid into her mouth and down her throat. She choked, clutching and tearing at her neck.

Cassie was awoken by a grunting, rasping sound, something nudging her from Aaron's side. She nudged him back with her elbow and rolled away from him. He poked her again, in the small of her back. Cassie opened her eyes, turned to face him, and opened her mouth to berate him.

Her mouth dropped open. Her nightmare had come true. She was lost for words. Speechless.

She rolled to one side, onto her hands and feet. She crabbed backward. She had never seen anything so horrific her whole life. It shocked her.

One of the giant snakes had gotten into the nest. It lay where Aaron was, where he was sleeping.

It was in the process of consuming him.

There was an Aaron-shaped figure inside the snake's skin. He had managed to get one of his arms up over his mouth and nose, creating a small space to breathe. How he had managed to do that when the snake was busy consuming him, Cassie couldn't say. But here was the evidence. She supposed it didn't really matter how it had happened, only that it had.

The snake flexed its wide gaping mouth, extending over Aaron's hips by another inch. Aaron kicked, flailing. That was what disturbed Cassie the most. A living creature—a human—fighting for its life. It was this struggling that had awoken her.

The snake had somehow managed to take Aaron from the top of the head. How had Aaron not woken up? How had he gotten himself in this situation? But he was still alive.

He spoke, his words muffled. Cassie couldn't understand a word he was saying, but he was clearly trying to communicate with her. She approached the Aaron-shaped lump and put her hand to the arm on his head. She spoke

in comforting tones, knowing he likely couldn't understand what she was saying. The tone itself would be the message.

She was asking him to stay calm, that she was going to get him free. He needed to conserve what little oxygen reserves he had left. Aaron relaxed and stopped kicking his legs. Evidently he had understood what she was saying.

Cassie approached the snake's head. Its eyes were rolled back into its head, the protective layers of its eyelids in place. It was not the same scarred snake that had first attacked Cassie in the mist, but another, slightly smaller one.

Cassie beat on the snake's head, pummeling it with her fist. The snake's eyes slitted open. It attempted to roll over to protect itself, but Aaron was too large and heavy to allow the movement. Cassie didn't let up, and continued to belt the creature. The snake slid its protective eyelids shut and gulped faster.

Aaron must have been running out of oxygen now. Cassie needed to figure out a way to destroy this snake before it swallowed Aaron whole or suffocated him. But Cassie wouldn't—couldn't—let that happen.

She reached into the elastic of her pants and extracted her knife. She slipped the blade into the corner of the snake's mouth and pulled back, and just like that, the snake wore a Chelsea Smile. Cassie took hold of the snake's upper and lower jaws and pulled, splitting it down the middle, peeling it back like a banana skin.

The snake's slimy inner juices covered Aaron head to foot. Aaron still had his arm over his face. He gasped a deep lungful of fresh air. He didn't stop till he filled his lungs. Then he rolled away from the snake and its entrails.

"Thank you," Aaron said between breaths.

"You're welcome," Cassie said. "Now all we have to worry about is whether these things are venomous. Otherwise you're doomed."

"It's not venomous," Aaron said.

"How do you know that?" Cassie said.

"Because I'm still conscious," Aaron said. "There's no way I would still be breathing if something that large had a venomous bite. It's a constrictor. It crushes its food to death before consuming them."

"Then why didn't it crush you first?" Cassie said.

“It must have taken me for dead when it started consuming me,” Aaron said.

“Wonderful,” Cassie said.

*Hisssssssss.*

Cassie and Aaron spun around to face the noise. A sliver of shadow slithered underneath the giant eggs.

Cassie bent down and reached for sticks that poked up from the nest floor. She checked where she was putting her hand to ensure she wasn’t reaching down the throat of a snake. She returned her gaze straight ahead and focused on the peripheries of her vision.

“You think there’s another one here?” Aaron said.

“I know there is,” Cassie said. “So do you. Come on.”

They edged toward the eggs. There was no giant bird to help them this time.

“What do you want to do?” Aaron said. “What’s the game plan?”

“We wait for the birds to return,” Cassie said. “Then we’ll scare the snake out for the birds to take care of, like last time.”

“Sounds good to me,” Aaron said. “The less contact we have with them, the better.”

He brushed his hands over his hair to dislodge the slime.

Aaron and Cassie moved to the far side of the nest and sat on the edge, watching the eggs. Aaron moved to the vine that hung over the side, the vine he had used to climb up the previous day. He took out his knife and began hacking at it, cutting through each strand until he had worked his way through. The rope fell over the side and disappeared into the mist below.

A silver tongue, cast in moonlight, flapped from between two eggs, and a pair of large slitted eyes blinked into the light.

Aaron and Cassie squared off against the snake. Cassie recognized it by its scarred chin and large bulbous yellow eyes immediately. His damaged forked tongue flickered between his thick lips. It lowered its head and darted toward Cassie, who swung her stick and struck the side of the snake’s head. The snake was strong, prepared for the blow.

It was only by Cassie’s quick feet that she wasn’t impaled by the snake’s enormous fangs. The snake struck the floor of the nest. Cassie rolled up onto her feet. Aaron was ready with his own stick, and swung at

the snake too, catching it below the jaw. The snake shook its head and repositioned its jaws.

The snake turned to face the two young fighters. Cassie waved her stick side to side at the snake. But it was ready, and caught the stick in its mouth, eyes unblinking and focused on the kids. It tensed its jaws, snapping the stick in half, and spat the two sticks out.

They were playing for time. If they could just keep the snake here, and stay alive, long enough for the birds to turn up, they would deal with the snake for them. But that was not going to be an easy task. The snake drew itself up on its powerful muscles to its full height, staring them down.

The snake hissed and rushed forward again, sensing victory. Cassie had no weapon in her hands. The snake's grin was wide. Aaron moved to protect Cassie, but the snake lashed out and tore his stick away from him too. They were defenseless.

The snake fell upon Cassie, knocking her to the ground. The harsh splinters of the nest dug into her back and neck. She tried to roll aside, to push the snake away, but its coils were too heavy. She couldn't do it. She shuffled backward, but the snake pressed harder on her chest, pinning her down.

The snake glared down at her with its big yellow gleaming eyes, its lips peeling back, savoring the meal to come. Its long forked tongue slipped around its lips and made delicious movements. Aaron threw rocks at the snake, but it wasn't to be distracted. Not this time.

This time it intended on enjoying the kill.

Cassie shuffled back on her hands. The snake rolled its scales over her legs, pinning her down. She was doomed. Cassie's hands came to something sharp in a gap in the nest. She didn't know what it was. She seized it. It felt hard, with a razor's edge.

The snake threw itself on Cassie, who brought her arm up in self defense. The snake lurched back, body writhing in agony.

Cassie looked at the sharp implement in her hand. It was bloody along its sharp point. The snake thrashed, bleeding from one eye. Cassie rolled out from under it as soon as she felt the snake's weight leave her.

"What is it doing?" Aaron said

"Its eye," Cassie said. "I think I stabbed him in the eye."

"Now we need to finish it off," Aaron said. "It's not going to go over the side if we don't. We have to push it over."

Cassie and Aaron ran forward, slowing down as they got close. They dashed forward and hurled their body weight at the creature, sending it sprawling over the side and into the mist and unflinching mountain below.

Aaron heaved a sigh of relief. He sat with his back against the nest.

“I’m so glad that’s over,” he said. “I never want to see another living thing ever again.”

Cassie sat beside him.

“What was it that saved you anyway?” Aaron said. “The thing you found?”

Cassie held up her hands. Quill-like needles stuck out from between her fingers, sharp and carved to vicious points.

“They’re darts,” Aaron said. “Hunting darts, if I’m not mistaken.”

“How do you know that?” Cassie said.

“I’ve seen them often enough on TV and in movies,” Aaron said.

“Hunting darts?” Cassie said. “But that means…”

“There are other people in this world,” Aaron said. “Or used to be.”

# 12.

BRYAN AND ZOE jogged down a dirt track that wound through a thick copse. They needed to get across to the far side of the world, a distance they couldn't see beyond the rolling green hills and mountains. They didn't even really know which direction they were meant to be heading in, and wouldn't have known what to look for even if they had.

They slowed to a walk. They bent down to sup from a stream, satiating their thirst. It looked clean enough, which was the best they could do under the circumstances.

"I've been thinking about the bird we saw," Zoe said. "There's something I don't understand. The size of it, the sheer weight. It shouldn't be able to fly and stay in the sky the way it does. Its wings are large, but I don't think they're big enough to support it."

"It's a bird," Bryan said. "Why shouldn't it be able to fly?"

"There's a critical mass that prohibits birds from growing any larger than a certain size, from being any bigger than the laws of physics allow," Zoe said. "It's that size we see in the bird. But this bird seems to surpass that."

"So what are you saying?" Bryan said.

"I'm saying there's something else at work here," Zoe said. "Something that explains how a bird of that size is capable of remaining airborne."

"Maybe you just got your calculations wrong," Bryan said.

Zoe shrugged her shoulders.

"Maybe," she said.

Bryan looked up at the distant horizon, at the wall they were trailing, running to the left of their position. Somewhere out there were Aaron and Cassie. And they were waiting for them.

"It seems wherever we go, whatever we do, we end up losing one or more of the kids," Zoe said.

"It's part of growing up, I guess," Bryan said. "They were always going to head away from us, leave us. We were never going to be there for them forever."

“I know,” Zoe said. “But we could have been there for them till they were safe.”

“That’s not our decision, no matter how much we wish we were there to be the ones to lead them through all this,” Bryan said. “But really, there’s no way for us to be in control. They just have to fly and find their own feet.”

“I just wish they didn’t have to lose their feet before having to find them,” Zoe said. “And it would be so much easier if there was a sign or someone to come here and just tell us where we’re meant to be heading. But there’s no one in this God forsaken place!”

They crested the mound. Zoe’s eyes widened in shock. She reached out unconsciously with her hand and pulled Bryan back like a mother with a child at a busy intersection, dragging him to the ground and holding him there.

“What are you doing?” Bryan said.

“Sh!” Zoe said.

She crawled forward and peered over the top of the small hillock they were now perched on. On the other side was a large facility, something like a mining operation, Zoe thought. They were bringing down hammers and axes, hacking at the rocks and fissures, carving through the land.

There was the soft *clink clink clink* of metal instruments on hard rock. The hard, tanned bodies of the miners were of a similar appearance. They were dark skinned and black haired. Their bodies were further darkened with a layer of dirt and grime. There was a general sense of resignation, but they worked hard and didn’t notice Bryan and Cassie there.

It was one of the strangest and yet most alluring things Zoe had ever seen. Red hot lava dribbled from the cracks in the wall and formed a stream across the landscape. The workers were using the flowing magma as hot coals to pump heat into forging their tools.

“So much for people not living here,” Bryan said.

“Hard not to feel a little stupid now, isn’t it?” Zoe said.

“We need to approach them, speak to them,” Bryan said. “If anyone knows where our kids are, they will.”

“Our record of asking for help hasn’t been too great so far,” Zoe said. “We need to be cautious. Every time we speak with someone in one of these places, we end up getting in trouble for it.”

“Then how do you suggest we go about doing it?” Bryan said.

“Direct was the way I was raised,” Zoe said. “We don’t have time to play around. Plus, how else are we meant to outwit them? We can’t. We just have to ask.”

“We should be careful about who we approach,” Zoe said. “That way we can at least control who our point of contact will be.”

“Yes,” Bryan said. “Good thinking. We can always pass ourselves off as random strangers just passing through.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for both of us to walk up to them,” Zoe said. “Just in case something happens, one of us can rescue the other.”

“Aren’t we full of good ideas today?” Bryan said. “Who shall we approach?”

Zoe peered over the verge. Both men and women worked the mine, hefting heavy pickaxes and slamming them into the hard stony earth. It wasn’t comforting. Then she turned to look at the others working different jobs. Some were cooking food, with heavy clouds of steam billowing forth. They were laughing and joking with one another. Better, but they worked with sharp knives and boiling water. Nope.

Finally, she came to the pigeon chested men and short women working in the river, washing clothes. They would have strong arms and powerful muscles, but they were also chatting, bent over and scrubbing at the clothes.

“Them,” Zoe said. “They’re who I’ll approach.”

“You’ll approach?” Bryan said. “Why don’t I approach them?”

“Because you’re bigger and stronger than me,” Zoe said. “If I need to be rescued, you’re the one to do it.”

“That sounds like me,” Bryan said. “Mr. Rescuer.”

Zoe took a deep breath and stood up.

“No time like the present,” she said.

She walked toward the river. She got within a dozen yards before one of them caught sight of her. They stood up, hands bracing their arched backs.

Bryan couldn’t help the fluttering feeling in his stomach. Why did he feel like everything was going to go bad? Oh yeah, that’s right. Because it always did.

# 13.

AARON AND CASSIE lay on their backs staring up at the sky. The colors were faded monochrome. There was little they could see, and that was fine with them. The stars seemed larger here than they were on the surface. It was nice they had something to distract themselves with, something to keep their eyes and mind focused on, something they didn't have to worry about protecting themselves from—at least for a little while.

"Do you think we'll ever get out of here?" Aaron said to Cassie.

"I don't know," Cassie said. "But I do know there isn't much chance of us *not* trying to get out of here. If we're not always trying to escape and get away I don't think our parents could live with it."

"Could you?" Aaron said.

"No," Cassie said. "But I suppose if we came across somewhere that wasn't too bad, somewhere that wasn't all that different to the way we used to live in the countryside somewhere, I suppose I might be okay living there."

"The countryside?" Aaron said. "I never pictured you as a country bumpkin."

"Neither did I, before coming here," Cassie said. "But I suppose we always discover things about ourselves, don't we? That's the only way we can develop and explore."

"How do you think Jim is getting on?" Aaron said.

"He'll be fine," Cassie said. "He's not the type of person to let anything get in his way. He'll achieve what he wants."

"Jim as king," Aaron said, shaking his head. "Hard to imagine, isn't it?"

"Not as hard as some, I suppose," Cassie said. "He did have a certain bearing about him."

"Maybe great people are born the way they are," Aaron said.

"No," Cassie said, taking Aaron by the hand. "They're forged in difficult situations, just like the ones we're going through."

Aaron looked at his hand held in Cassie's. He smiled at her.

"I've been thinking," Cassie said. "If we can't escape the nest, then the least we can do is get the risk away from us."

She turned to look at the eggs. They were sitting there idly, doing nothing but minding their own business. And yet right then they incubated the greatest threat to their survival.

“What do you want to do with them?” Aaron said.

Cassie approached the eggs and put a hand to a shell, moving from one to the next. She knocked on them. There was an answer, a hollow thud on the other side. A crack formed in the egg she’d knocked on, a long one that reached from top to bottom.

“We have to leverage them over the side,” Cassie said. “We don’t have much time.”

“I’m not sure…” Aaron said.

“What aren’t you sure about?” Cassie said. “If we don’t do something, they will hatch and eat us.”

“But they’re chicks,” Aaron said.

Cassie gave Aaron a flat look.

“I swear, if you’re making the point that these ‘little’ chicks will be too cute to kill, I’ll hit you,” she said.

Aaron smiled sheepishly.

“You’re right,” he said. “Us before them.”

“Finally, common sense prevails,” Cassie said.

# 14.

BRYAN KNEW they were safe when Zoe turned and pointed in his direction. She wouldn't have knowingly put him in danger. She must have felt confident with her situation to have revealed his location to them like that. But he didn't get to his feet. She might not have been pointing to him at all, but at something in the distance.

Then some of the miners approached Zoe, and she again pointed in Bryan's direction. The locals approached him. The last thing he wanted was to look like a man too afraid to face them on his feet, and so he edged back and rolled up onto the balls of his feet, looking, he liked to think, like a tiger about to pounce at any moment.

The locals showed no sign of alarm as they looked Bryan up and down. The man standing before the other miners was thick limbed and strong, with a broad chest and dark hair that hung limply over his eyes.

"You're Bryan?" the miner said.

"I am," Bryan said.

"I'm Sturgess," the miner said. "Your wife wishes for you to come join her."

His voice was deep and gruff, but kind and appraising. It was not in the harsh tones Bryan had come to associate with the pirates of the last world. Bryan stood up and followed the mining men and women back in Zoe's direction.

They followed him, giving him some space. It wasn't how a prisoner would be trailed, but someone treated with respect. By the time he got close to Zoe he could hear her laughing and joking with the locals.

The children seemed fascinated with Zoe's clothes, pulling on them and touching the soft fabric. She was currently wearing an amalgamation of clothing from both the surface and other worlds. They seemed fascinated with how delicate and soft they were—despite them not being all that soft after their ordeal.

"So, you're not a Merchant?" a local woman said.

"A what?" Zoe said.

"A Merchant," the woman repeated. "One of the elite."

“I don’t know what that means,” Zoe said.

“How are we doing here, Zoe?” Bryan said cautiously.

The locals’ eyes flicked to Bryan, their eyes lighting up. They touched his clothing too. Bryan held out his arms to be touched. He glanced every few seconds at Zoe. What was going on here?

“I was just telling them our story, about where we came from,” Zoe said. “I told them our children were taken by a pair of giant birds.”

“Do they know where they went?” Bryan said.

“Yes,” Zoe said. “They’ll draw us a map and show us where their nest is. But they say they can only be vague. They’ve only heard of the location in stories and myths passed down from their ancestors.”

“It’s better than what we know right now,” Bryan said.

“That’s what I said,” Zoe said.

“Come,” the local woman said “You must be hungry, thirsty and tired from your long journey. Come with us.”

“Thank you,” Zoe said. “But we’d rather be on our way.”

Bryan pressed his lips together. He wasn’t much in the mood for turning down a hot meal, no matter what it consisted of.

“The mountain, and your children, will not be going anywhere soon,” Sturgess said. “Rest, and you’ll better serve them when you are strong.”

Zoe still didn’t look convinced, and she opened her mouth to argue. She was beaten to the punch.

A shout went up and the locals turned to look at the great fissure they’d been working on. They left Bryan and Zoe and ran to join their fellow miners, who were heaving on long ropes attached to something inside the mine. They heaved and pulled, dust and rocks rolling down either side of the wide opening. Tears of lava followed.

The miners heaved with each tug, pulling at something inside that clearly did not want to be removed. Then there was a loud crack, and a huge boulder, about the size of a mansion house, slid forward. Amidst the dust and debris and shouting voices came another crack, and the whole boulder slid forward.

The boulder was black, but shimmered with a faint emerald green sheen, with a light that didn’t seem like it emanated from this world.

And then something strange happened.

Bryan had noticed it a few minutes earlier, when the ground shifted beneath his feet. He’d taken it for the boulder’s juddering effects on the

landscape, but as the boulder slid toward the opening, it came to a stop. The ground didn't feel like it was moving away from him, but instead pulling him forward, toward the giant rock.

And when he looked down, Bryan saw the dirt and mud and little rocks jittering against the rubber soles of his shoes. He didn't quite know what to make of that. They shivered and shook, dancing in the direction of the giant boulder, as if it were the Pied Piper.

The little rocks picked up speed and rolled across the ground in its direction, before finally leaping up and flying toward the giant boulder.

And they weren't the only things.

The locals' clothing fluttered, snapping in a non-existent wind. Their tools, some made of metal, others wood, also crept forward, hovering toward the boulder, scuttling across the surface, before leaving the ground and making solid contact with the rock.

The locals, used to such goings on, pulled on cords they kept around their sleeves and pant legs to keep them in place and not have to press them down and keep them flat.

"What is going on here?" Zoe said.

"I have no idea," Bryan said.

"Is it magnetic?" Zoe said.

"How can it be?" Bryan said. "The things it's attracting aren't only made of metal."

"Then what is it?" Zoe said.

"I'm sure I have no idea," Bryan said. "But whatever it is, it's powerful."

"Maybe it's made from the same stuff as the rocks we saw earlier," Zoe said. "The floating ones."

"Maybe," Bryan said. "But I don't see how that helps us."

The locals dropped the ropes and cheered, fists pumping the air.

"They're certainly happy about something," Zoe said.

Sturgess broke away from the other miners, a triumphant broad smile on his face, and approached Bryan and Zoe.

"Have you decided to stay?" he said.

Zoe pressed her lips together.

"Only for a short while," she said.

"How long have you been mining here?" Bryan said.

"For as long as our ancestors' memories," Sturgess said.

“A long time then,” Bryan said.

“Yes,” Sturgess said. “But we haven’t always mined Gravitas.”

“Gravitas?” Bryan said. “What’s that?”

“The magnetic rocks, like what you see here,” Sturgess said. “Only they aren’t magnets, but gravity. They suck everything with a mass toward them. That’s why we call them Gravitas. We considered them holy relics, something put here to ward and protect us. They kept the hot red rivers from our lands, kept us safe.”

“Why do you mine for them now?” Zoe said.

“Because we have no other choice,” Sturgess said. “Once upon a time we were proud and happy people. Everyone in this world was. We were equal, every man, woman and child. No one was considered more or less important than anyone else. We each fulfilled an important role, a part of the whole. And then something changed.

“One day the Merchants came to us. They were farmers, growing crops and livestock, and they shared them amongst the people, just as we shared what we mined. Then one day they decided their product was worth more than ours. They demanded more gems, more rocks, in exchange for their food.

“This had never happened before. Everyone understood we all needed every resource in order to survive in comfort. To consider food more valuable than water or wood, was crazy. But there is something in human nature, I think, that will forever mean we will want to be better than others, that we will forever want to dominate and have dominion over them.

“And there are those who want to dominate, as well as those who are more amenable to being dominated. Everyone is on this continuum and all must accept their place within it. We all know the kind of people we are, where we belong. There is no way to change the nature of people.”

“No,” Zoe said. “But you don’t need to change the nature of people, only your situation. Sometimes all it takes is a single lion amongst the lambs to lead them to great victories and greater success. Only one is needed to unite an army.”

“But sheep are sheep,” Sturgess said.

“And an excuse is an excuse,” Bryan said. “You will never change or adapt if you accept that way of life for yourself. Not when you could become something else, something more. Revolutions have been started

for a great deal less than the situation you have here. There is nothing I can do to aid you. You can only help yourself, but you have to want to help yourselves, or else you will be stuck here forever the way you are."

"Maybe we like it the way it is," Sturgess said, with more than a contrarian air about him.

"Carry on then," Bryan said. "But in twenty years' time, when your own children's backs are breaking under the same labor you toiled under, do you want to look back and think what might have been? What could have been achieved if you had only stood up and done something about it?"

"We're just miners," Sturgess said. "What can we do?"

Zoe stood in front of the muscular man and looked him straight in the eye.

"A great deal more than you believe," she said.

# 15.

CASSIE SLID a thick wedge of wood over the stack of rocks and then fixed it under the egg closest to the nest's edge, where she might be able to leverage it over the side. She pushed with all her weight, her arms shaking under the strain. The lever creaked.

The egg was far heavier than Cassie had expected. She thought she felt the egg begin to move, edging up by an inch. She leaned further over it. The wood creaked louder.

*Snap!*

Cassie fell forward. She was on the floor of the nest, lying atop the thick trunk and the broken lever. She got to her hands and knees and peered at the egg. It hadn't moved one inch. She clenched her teeth and kicked the egg. It was hard. She hopped back, clutching her foot.

Cassie turned her glare on Aaron, who sat across the nest, cross legged before a collection of rock fragments.

"Aaron," Cassie said, standing over him with her hands on her hips. "I thought you were going to help me force the eggs over the side."

"Something of that size must weigh two hundred pounds," Aaron said. "Maybe more. You'll never lift it over the side without machines."

"Would you at least try and give me a hand?" Cassie said.

"All right," Aaron said. "But don't get angry when I say 'I told you so'."

"Then don't say it," Cassie said. "Even if you could."

"Sorry, I can't make that promise," Aaron said. "There are too few chances of happiness to be had here as it is."

"Being right is happiness to you?" Cassie said.

"It ain't unhappiness," Aaron said. "I know that much."

"Give me a hand," Cassie said.

They picked up a thick wedge of wood and jammed it under the egg. They pressed their weight onto it. The branch snapped. Aaron got to his feet, glanced at Cassie, who wore a glare that threatened great violence, and then strolled away without saying a word. He returned to his collection of broken rocks.

Cassie approached him and folded her arms. She sat beside him.

“At least I’m trying to get out of here,” Cassie said. “You’re just playing games.”

“Putting a puzzle together, actually,” Aaron said.

“A puzzle isn’t a game?” Cassie said.

“A puzzle is a brain stimulation exercise,” Aaron said.

“Right,” Cassie said, rolling her eyes. “Like I said, a game.”

She looked closer at what he was working on.

“What is that?” she said.

“I think it’s a map,” Aaron said.

“You think?” Cassie said. “Why don’t you know?”

“Because there are a lot of pieces missing,” Aaron said. “It’s hard to tell what it is.”

“A map?” Cassie said. “A map of what?”

“A place,” Aaron said. “What else could it be a map of?”

“But there’s nothing here, and no people,” Cassie said. “You saw the blasted lands when the bird flew up here. There’s nothing here.”

“Doesn’t mean it has always been that way,” Aaron said. “I mean, someone must have been here to make this map, right? I mean, it’s carved in stone. It takes a certain amount of skill and technological development to be able to make something like this. And judging by the map they drew, it wasn’t always like this. There used to be plants, trees, animals, forests.”

“Animals, I can attest to,” Cassie said with a glance toward the eggs.

“But what are all these other pieces?” Cassie said, touching them with her foot.

“I don’t know,” Aaron said. “It looks like there are two maps.”

“One before, one after whatever happened here?” Cassie said.

“Maybe,” Aaron said. “But then, some of the locations ought to match up. Like here. There’s the mountain we’re on, and the mountain can’t have just suddenly popped into existence, can it?”

“Unless it did,” Cassie said. “The world might have suddenly changed.”

“And there are still things here for the birds to eat,” Aaron said. “And the snakes. We’re surrounded by bones and plants. There might be some part of the world that is still okay.”

“But which parts?” Cassie said.

Aaron shrugged.

“If it wasn’t for the mist, we might be able to see,” he said. “As it is, I don’t know.”

“Why are the rocks here in the first place?” Cassie said. “It’s not like the chicks can eat it.”

“They need rocks because they don’t have peristalsis,” Aaron said, “that is, the ability to move food into their stomachs with the use of internal muscles in the esophagus. They need these rocks in order to be able to mash up their food. That’s how they do it.”

“How do you even know all of this?” Cassie said.

Aaron shrugged.

“But these birds use these rocks for a reason they don’t fully understand,” he said. “They sit here and swallow them, grind up their food, and then drop them in the morning before they take off to fly. These rocks might be the best at grinding up their food, but they’re not the lightest and airiest rocks to carry around if they need to take wing.”

“How about the Passage?” Cassie said. “Have you seen anywhere where it might be yet?”

“No,” Aaron said. “But like the water world, it might not even be on the surface. If this world has endured some tumultuous event, which is very likely with all the lava all over the place, there might not be any sign of it anymore. It might be gone.”

“That’s a comforting thought,” Cassie said.

There was a tearing sound, something Aaron and Cassie didn’t immediately recognize. They followed it to the middle shell, the one Cassie had knocked on earlier.

Cassie pressed her hand to its surface and found a hole in the shell, the missing piece, like the piece of a puzzle, laying on the nest’s floor.

“Our time’s almost up,” Cassie said.

# 16.

THE ACCOMMODATION Bryan and Zoe had been assigned were temporary buildings. They had canvas walls and ceilings, tents that could be easily removed from one place to another. It wasn't large, but it was comfortable, with hanging animal skins and feather pillows. Children ran between the tents playing tag, their shadows dancing on the walls.

The children worked, as evidenced by the cuts and grazes on their arms and legs. They helped their parents with mining, as well as the other jobs in the camp. There was no formal education. They were schooled in the skill of mining. That was their education, their calling. It had been chosen for them.

The tents had thick luxurious blankets and pillows spread across the floor. It had a warm homely lived-in feel that was not lost on the surface-dwelling adults. It was like a warm retreat away from the harsh winter, a quirky getaway in a teepee.

"They seem nice," Zoe said.

"Locals have seemed nice before, if you'll recall," Bryan said. "But then out come the pitchforks and the flaming torches. Before long they're beating our heads open with cudgels."

He moved to the door and pulled a flap open, peering out.

"We can't trust these people," he said. "We need to get out of here as soon as we can."

"Nice to know you're not about to panic anytime soon," Zoe said, rolling her eyes. "They said they would give us a map of where we might find the kids."

"Holding us ransom," Bryan said. "That's what this is."

"Ransom for what?" Zoe said. "We don't have anything they want."

"There's always something," Bryan said. "You'll see."

He bent over a washbasin and scrubbed his face with cold water and soap. He managed to wash half the floorspace while he was at it. Zoe took her turn, taking special care to scrub behind her ears. Somehow she'd managed to get a small mountain tucked behind them.

Once they were washed and cleaned they took a long nap. When they awoke they found their clothes clean, dry and repaired. They were invited to join the locals, who were themselves washed and cleaned and prepared for what appeared to be a special event. They looked upon Bryan and Zoe with something approaching expectation.

The locals wore loincloths and danced around the pool of magma. Then they sat around flat tables on the ground and began to eat with their fingers.

“So,” Sturgess said. “You’re from the surface.”

“We are,” Zoe said.

Whispers broke out amongst the assembled. They were excited about something.

“Please, tell us about your world,” Sturgess said.

“What would you like to know?” Bryan said.

“Anything and everything,” Sturgess said. “Whatever you think would be of interest to us.”

“There’s so much…” Bryan said. “There’s a sky, a large land mass, oceans…”

“Oceans?” Sturgess said, ears perking up.

“Yes, very large ones,” Bryan said. “They reach from one end of the world to the other. In fact, we just came from a world almost entirely dominated by water.”

The locals’ eyes were wide. It sounded like the stuff of dreams.

“There are other worlds?” Sturgess said.

“Yes, many probably,” Bryan said. “But we’ve only seen two so far. Three, including this one.”

“You’re the leader here?” Zoe said.

“Unofficially,” Sturgess said. “Officially, there is no leader. We govern ourselves.”

“Is there anything in particular you would like to know about our world?” Zoe said. “Perhaps it would be easier for you to ask questions about the things you’d like to know about.”

“Do you have miners where you come from?” a local with a narrow face said.

“Yes,” Bryan said. “We have miners, but not as many as we used to. Though there are more in other countries around the world.”

“How many countries are there?” another local with a missing finger said.

“One hundred and ninety-five at last count,” Bryan said. “But there are more and more all the time.”

“More grow?” the local said.

“That can happen, but it’s rare,” Bryan said. “Usually from the bottom of the sea, from active volcanoes. Usually new countries are formed from old ones: breaking apart and claiming independence.”

“Break apart?” Sturgess said. “What do you mean?”

“They decide they’re better off on their own and govern themselves,” Bryan said.

“Oh,” Sturgess said. “I didn’t know such a thing was possible.”

“Of course it is,” Bryan said. “Just as countries can join together, they can break apart too, and become smaller nations within the whole. And not just countries, but groups within nations, and countries within continents. There’s no way of stopping it once it takes hold.”

“When what takes hold?” Sturgess said.

“An idea,” Zoe said. “They can be infectious. They can grip tighter than a wrestler and won’t let go, and can be deadlier than anything man can make. Though, I suppose, it could be argued ideas are manmade.”

A silence filled the space. Bryan wasn’t sure it was a good one.

“What is it you mine for here?” Zoe said. “You mentioned Gravitas before. We noticed the material you took out of the ground, and the strange properties it has.”

“After we extract each boulder we must remove ourselves to another location,” Sturgess said. “The magma and lava follows us wherever we go.”

“Do you ever think maybe you shouldn’t take the magnet rocks out of the earth?” Zoe said. “That perhaps they’re part of a larger ecosystem?”

“Yes,” Sturgess said. “Frequently. But the Merchants need it. And without them, we would go hungry. We no longer have the means of supporting ourselves or our families, and so we’re left with no choice but to do this.”

“Where are these Merchants?” Zoe said.

“Far from here,” Sturgess said. “Out of reach for most of us. It seems whenever we have troubles, they hit us harder to punish us, as if it was our fault for not hitting our quotas.”

“That’s barbaric,” Zoe said.

“That’s life,” Sturgess said. “And how can we help you? I understand you’ve lost your children?”

“We didn’t lose them,” Zoe said. “They were taken from us.”

“Taken?” Sturgess said.

“By giant birds,” Bryan said.

“Ah,” Sturgess said. “The Humungo birds. I understand. Then you have a long journey ahead of you. The birds live far from here. That is part of the reason why we travel around to work, why we live so far from other people.”

“Can you show us where these birds live?” Zoe said.

“Of course,” Sturgess said. “Though you will find the journey difficult.”

“Please let us know what the fastest route is,” Zoe said. “We want to get there as quickly as possible.”

“It’ll be over land,” Sturgess said. “It’s always over land here. We don’t have a lot of water.”

“I wonder what made the Merchants think their commodity was worth more than the Gravitas material,” Zoe said. “On the surface, your material would be the most valuable resource in the world.”

“But we’re not on the surface,” Sturgess said. “Maybe they just woke up one day and came up with the idea. Stranger things have been known to happen. People wake up, decide they want something new, something they haven’t ever wanted before, and they pursue it. They’re greedy and can’t wait to begin extracting as much as they can out of the people. And for the past thirty years we’ve just put up with it.”

“But you don’t have to,” Zoe said.

“Earlier you mentioned about how some of your countries decided to be independent,” Sturgess said.

“Yes,” Zoe said.

“How did they do that?” Sturgess said. “How did they go from dreaming about it, to actually doing it?”

“With great difficulty, I imagine,” Zoe said. “But they did it. And if they can do it, anyone can. It begins with a seed, a doubt, a belief, a need and a want to be something more than they are. And then one person meets others like him, who want the same thing. I guess it grows from there.

“An idea becomes idealism, and eventually, after a great deal of time, they decide to work together to do something about it. And it’s then that

they become greater than just one or two, or even a group, of people, when they become the idea themselves."

Sturgess nodded, taking in the life lessons Zoe was giving him. He looked up at the sky.

"Sometimes I look up at the stars and think about whether there are other people out there, looking back down on me," he said.

He turned to Zoe.

"And now I know there is someone else out there," he said. "They're not where I thought they would be, but people from another world, another place."

"Yes," Zoe said. "And we'll need your help if we're going to get back there."

"I wish I could help you," Sturgess said. "Really, I do. But in all our years of digging we've never found a way out. Ever."

"Where does the Gravitas go after you unearth it?" Bryan said.

"To the Merchants," Sturgess said.

"How do you get to them?" Bryan said.

"With the use of a large Gravitas platform," Sturgess said.

Bryan shook his head.

"We're looking for something more like a Passage," he said.

"A Passage?" Sturgess said. "What's that?"

Zoe's heart sank. If he didn't even know what it was called, how was he going to know where it was?

"It's a doorway," Zoe said. "A way out of this place, to another world. Someone steps through it and when they come out the other end, they emerge in another place. Have you seen anywhere like that?"

"Ah," Sturgess said with a light in his eyes. "Yes. We have such a place."

"You do?" Bryan said. "You know where it is?"

"Of course," Sturgess said. "In fact, we're just about to use it now. Would you like to see?"

# 17.

“THERE’S SOMETHING wrong with this map,” Aaron said.

“Of course there is,” Cassie said. “It’s in a million pieces.”

Aaron had been hard at work piecing it together for the past few hours, barely even taking his eyes off it while he ate. With his photographic memory, he was able to link images together in a way Cassie could never do. They were a mosaic, consisting of thousands of individual pieces. It distracted Aaron and kept him calm, reason enough to let him continue with it.

Cassie was occasionally able to find one or two pieces, but it was predominantly up to Aaron to put the map together. Each time he picked up a piece he was quick to discover another that was its twin, recalling exactly where he’d put it amongst the dozens of piles he’d assembled.

Aaron stood up and peered down at the pieces he had fit together with a critical eye. As he moved around them, he tilted his head from one side to the other, trying as best he could to fit them together in his mind, deciding how best to approach them.

“What do you mean?” Cassie said.

“They don’t all fit together,” Aaron said. “There are too many pieces. I’m certain it’s a map. But of what?”

“I thought it was of this world?” Cassie said.

“I can’t seem to locate the areas we started in and flew over,” Aaron said. “This is the mountain where we are now. But the magma area we first appeared is on this other map. How can that be? It’s like we arrived on one planet, and then the birds took us to another.”

“The world has probably changed since we came here,” Cassie said.

“Sure,” Aaron said. “But not to this extent.”

“Maybe it’s a badly designed piece of work,” Cassie said. “There are old maps of our world that are completely wrong.”

“Maybe,” Aaron said with a frown.

“What else could it be?” Cassie said.

“I don’t know,” Aaron admitted.

He turned his head, taking in the pieces.

“It’s almost like they’re pieces of two different maps,” he said. “But why would anyone make a map of two different worlds when he was in this one?”

“So maybe someone from another world came here,” Cassie said. “That’s not beyond the realm of possibility, is it? We did, after all.”

“No,” Aaron said. “I suppose not. But why would someone put them in mosaic form?”

“Why not?” Cassie said. “Maybe it was a show of knowledge or something. A way to show how smart they were, with two worlds coming together like this.”

The birds deposited some strange fruit on the floor of the nest. It wasn’t meant for their consumption, of course, but for the chicks once they hatched. There wasn’t a chance Cassie and Aaron weren’t going to eat it while they had the chance.

“Come eat something,” Cassie said. “We’ll get back to work after we fill our bellies.”

They sat down and began to munch on the fruit. It tasted sweet and stung the roofs of their mouths with flavor. The birds perched on one leg on the edge of the nest, heads tucked under their wings. They were sleeping, and not for the first time Cassie considered pushing them over the side.

Even if she was able to do so—unlikely, given their weight—they would only awaken and spread their wings and return back to the nest, angry and in need of vengeance. She’d need to tie their wings up, to make them incapable of being able to rescue themselves.

Even so, it would only remove part of the threat they faced. They were still perched on the top of a mountain with an army of giant snakes to battle through, not to mention the ravenous chicks who would attack them as soon as they hatched. It was hopeless.

Cassie sat back and continued to eat listlessly. They ate without conversation, Aaron’s mind far away and distant on the subject of the maps. Meanwhile, Cassie was left to hunt the few mice and rats that made it to the nest to pick over the scraps of food Cassie used as a lure. She

hunted with blow darts and other ancient weapons that the birds had unknowingly brought to the nest.

All the while, watching over them, were the six giant eggs. The cracks in their shells were growing longer, thicker, and soon they would no longer be in a single piece. At some point a gap had grown large enough to reveal a single blood vesseled eye peering down at them, unflinching, unblinking. And hungry.

# 18.

IT WAS A dour affair. But then, it was a funeral, Bryan thought. They should be somber events.

Shortly before Bryan and Zoe had shown up there had been a cave-in. Half a dozen miners had been buried beneath a shelf of earth and the other miners had been unable to get them out before they suffocated to death.

The fallen men and women were lined up before what Bryan recognized as a Passage, a slit in the earth. Their bodies lay prostrate beneath thin blankets. Not many people were shedding tears. Death was a common visitor in this part of the world.

There were songs, a beautiful mournful moan and groan from the throats of the assembled, accompanied by gentle drums. Families of the deceased stood closest to the Passage and their loved ones.

The Passage opened up, and an unbearable heat emanated from it, like standing before an open oven door when it's at full blast. Bryan could feel it even from this distance, despite being so far away. The congregation sweated profusely. There wasn't a man to say anything over the bodies, only the gentle mournful moans and groans.

The bodies were picked up and lowered into the pits one by one. The blankets were removed at the last moment—they couldn't afford to lose them. The bodies began to cook before they even arrived at the Passage. The flames licked their skin and made it bubble, their hair fizzle, an unpleasant burning aroma.

Then the meat began to burn and fester and cook, turning it brown before they sank into the flames. They dropped each of the bodies into the pit, one by one, until they were all gone. Once the flames had subsided, the singing slowed and came to a stop. The congregation began to disperse, until just Bryan and Zoe remained.

"Great," Bryan said, turning to Zoe. "Do you want to go in first, or shall I?"

"There must be a way to go through the Passage without getting cooked," Zoe said. "Some kind of ice suit or protective gel?"

“Look where we are,” Bryan said. “Does it look like they have a research center tucked away somewhere?”

“We’ll figure something out,” Zoe said. “None of this really matters till we get Aaron and Cassie back. Once we have them, then we can try to figure a way out of here.”

“Hey,” Sturgess said, approaching them. “I have the map you’ll need to get to the birds’ nest. It stops on the edge of our knowledge. After that, you’re on your own, but it should get you close to the nest.”

“Thank you,” Bryan said.

“Listen,” Sturgess said, running a hand through his thick locks. “Why don’t you stay with us? We have plenty of food and water, and I’m sure there’s lots of things you could teach us.”

“Thank you,” Zoe said. “But we need to find our children.”

Sturgess nodded, but was distant with thought.

“Look,” he said. “I didn’t want to tell you this before, but no one ever returns from the Humungos. I’m sorry. I don’t say this to discourage you. But it’s the truth. Once a Humungo takes them, they never come back.”

“There’s one difference between us and the others,” Bryan said. “We have no intention of coming back.”

Sturgess nodded, smiled, and then clapped Bryan on the shoulder.

“Yes,” he said. “Of course. And that shall be your saving grace, I have no doubt. We don’t have much, but what we have is yours. If there’s anything you need, don’t hesitate to ask. We wish you all the best in your efforts of finding your children.”

“Thank you, Sturgess,” Bryan said. “You’re a good man. Good people. You’ve renewed my trust in humanity.”

“You know, you don’t have to put up with this,” Zoe said to Sturgess. “With having the Merchants as your masters.”

“What other choice do we have?” Sturgess said.

Zoe could tell he already knew what other choice he had, but she pressed on anyway.

“You can rebel,” Zoe said.

“Rebel?” Sturgess said.

His face scrunched up with thought.

“What does this mean, ‘rebel’?” he said.

“It means to fight against those who try to wield power over you,” Zoe said.

“And how would we go about doing something like that?” Sturgess said.

“Well, you begin by making demands,” Zoe said. “Telling them what you want.”

“And they’ll just hand it to us?” Sturgess said.

“No,” Zoe said. “But you stop digging so they’ll have no choice but to give you what you want.”

“Stop digging?” Sturgess said. “But that’s what we are. We’re diggers. If we didn’t dig, what would we be?”

“You’d be humans,” Zoe said. “People. Who provide an important service.”

“What if they say no?” Sturgess said.

“Then they say no,” Zoe said. “What else can they do?”

“They can stop sending us food,” Sturgess said. “They barely send us enough as it is.”

Zoe picked up her backpack and hefted it onto her shoulders.

“Fine,” Zoe said. “But don’t go blaming others if your situation doesn’t change. It’s up to you to decide your fate, not someone else. Our kids were taken from us. Now, we’re going to get them back. You don’t have to live with your situation. Demand more. If you want more.”

Zoe shook Sturgess’s hand, an awkward operation, as he had never done it before, and then gave him a hug. Bryan shook his hand too. They turned and left the camp.

Sturgess watched the fleeting backs of these two extraordinary people. He certainly did want more. All the miners did. But did they have the courage to do what was necessary? Did he?

# 19.

“IF MOM and Bryan are coming to find us, they’ll probably come this way,” Aaron said, finger trailing a route across the map. “The least we can do is figure out where the Passage is.”

“Having these maps won’t do us much good anyway,” Cassie said. “We won’t be able to take them with us if we do manage to get out of here.”

“We don’t need to take them with us,” Aaron said.

“You can remember them?” Cassie said.

“I’ve already memorized them,” Aaron said with a shrug. “It’s not difficult.”

“Meanwhile the eggs are hatching,” Cassie said. “None of this means anything if those eggs hatch before our parents get here.”

Aaron turned to look at the eggs. He seemed surprised to find the large cracks in their shells. He’d been so absorbed in his activity he hadn’t noticed their degeneration.

“You’re right,” he said. “We need to come up with a way to keep them from hatching. We can’t push them over the side. They’re too heavy.”

“Then there’s only one thing we can do,” Cassie said.

She approached a pile of black sticks that sat to one side.

“I found these while I was looking for things to eat,” Cassie said. “But when I chewed on them, I found they were inedible. I kept chewing and chewing and spat them out. I couldn’t swallow it, even hungry as I was. Later, when it started to dry, I found it had become hard. I had to brush it off my teeth otherwise it would have glued my mouth shut.”

“Now *that* would have been a miracle,” Aaron said.

Cassie glared at him.

“I tried setting fire to them too, but they just melted, like they were made of candle wax or something,” she said.

“Natural glue,” Aaron said. “Luck. That makes a change.”

Cassie used the last of their kindling to start a small fire and handed a smoking stick to Aaron. She kept one for herself. They placed the black stick on the tip of the flame and after a moment, the stick began to melt.

Its black outer bark gave way to the cloudy white material excreted from beneath.

They approached the egg with the largest cracks and worked on it first. Soon, the eye that stared from the inside was covered. Cassie and Aaron didn't stop until they had smothered every inch of the cracks. The shell looked like it had received a facelift. Then they got started on the other shells, covering them with their own layer of liquid glue.

Finally, sweating from their exertions, their glue sticks run down to nubs, Cassie and Aaron backed away and appraised their handiwork. They'd done a good job, but now they were out of glue sticks. There was nothing more they could do. Hopefully it would be enough to hold the chicks back before their parents could find and rescue them.

Then the middle egg began to rock side to side.

The shell pressed outward from the inside. The glue held as the shell bent. Aaron and Cassie's breath was stuck in their throats. A hard thud smacked the inside of the egg. The shell rocked and rolled forward onto its front. There were three hard thrusts from the inside, and a beak smashed through the shell, a beak tiny in comparison to its parents, but still the size of Cassie and Aaron's heads.

Cassie and Aaron backed away.

"Now what do we do?" Aaron said. "We angered it. Now it's going to kill us!"

"No," Cassie said. "We'll hide."

"Hide where?" Aaron said. "It's going to find us eventually. And what'll we do for food? And what about the other chicks who'll hatch?"

"We'll think of something," Cassie said. "We always have in the past."

"We've never been trapped on the top of a mountain surrounded by giant killer snakes and birds before!" Aaron said.

"Stay calm," Cassie said.

"You stay calm!" Aaron said "I'm going to panic."

The chick chirruped and poked its beak out of the hole it had made.

"Push it back in!" Cassie said.

"Push it back in?" Aaron said. "You must be joking! It's ten times bigger than us! There's no way we'll push it back in its shell like that!"

"Then what do you suggest we do?" Cassie said.

"Hide!" Aaron said.

They ran around the eggs and hid behind them. They were big and there was plenty of space for them to conceal themselves. They peered around a shell to watch the renegade egg.

The sound of the shell cracking open was grotesque in the silence. Cassie caught sight of fluffy yellow feathers that pushed through the shell, covered in some kind of bloody viscous mucus. It got to its webbed feet and stood at its full height. It was enormous.

Cassie, not realizing she had been holding her breath, pulled back behind the egg. She came face to face with dozens of cracks over the remaining eggs. They too were already beginning to split open along the seams.

“We’re not going to get out of here,” Cassie said.

They weren’t going to last long hiding as they were. They were going to be discovered eventually. They needed to face their aggressors. Suddenly Cassie didn’t feel afraid any longer. When your number had been called, it had been called, and there was no way to outrun fate.

“Cassie!” Aaron said. “Cassie! What are you doing? Get down!”

“Our parents aren’t going to get to us in time,” Cassie said, her voice hollow.

“You don’t know that!” Aaron said. “There’s a chance they could find us, any minute.”

“There’s one place we need them to be, but they’re not,” Cassie said. “What does that tell you? You can count the time we have left by the cracks in the shells. There’s hardly any time left. I say we face this monster and face her on our own terms.”

Aaron just stared at Cassie, unsure of her words, unsure whether he wanted to take the risk, whether it was in fact worth taking in the first place. But he couldn’t help himself. He got to his feet too.

“I suppose we’ll have more chance of success if we try to defend ourselves together,” Aaron said. “Though we don’t have any weapons and no real way of succeeding. Let’s head into the fray and let ourselves get killed. Why not? It’s not like we’ve got anything else to live for.”

“Always looking on the bright side,” Cassie said. “That’s what I like about you, Aaron.”

They edged toward the wall. It felt like they were in a nightmarish fairy tale, populated by Humpty Dumpty’s extended family. Though Cassie

knew what she had to do, what she had to face, she wasn't all that excited about doing it.

She pulled back when she peered around the seemingly endless curve of the giant egg. It could have been the surface of its own dimpled planet. She rounded the shell to the middle of the nest.

Cassie gasped, coming to a stop. The chick was a perfectly scaled up version of the chicks Cassie had seen on the farms on the surface. There would have been nothing remotely scary about it if it wasn't for its sheer size. It was a beast.

It was six feet tall, wide around the hips and narrow at its shoulders. Its head was square and wore a small fractured piece of shell on its head, similar to a flat cap.

*Wark!* it said.

It appeared to be staring at nothing in particular, its back to them.

"Hey!" Cassie said.

"What are you doing?" Aaron hissed, pulling Cassie back.

The big yellow ball of fluff began to turn, slowly, ominously. But before it could lay eyes on Cassie, she stepped aside, taking Aaron's hand and pulling him in front of her, holding him there, a shield against the chick.

"You're sacrificing me?" Aaron said.

"Just shut up for a minute," Cassie said. "I've got an idea."

"That's easy for you to say," Aaron said. "You're not the one facing down a chick from hell."

The chick had made its full revolution and stared down at Aaron and Cassie with its big white googly eyes. He cocked his head to one side in curiosity before waddling closer.

Aaron squirmed against Cassie's grip.

"I've changed my mind," he said. "I don't want to sacrifice myself now."

"Hold still," Cassie said. "Trust me."

The chick bent forward and put its face within inches of Cassie's eyes. It was big and powerful, strong. Its beak looked sharp as a razorblade and glinted in the sunlight. Its huge eyes were fixed firmly on Aaron. It appeared to be waiting for him to do something.

The creature made a strange *Wark* sound. It could almost have been an English word, tinted with a question. Though what a newly hatched chick would have to say to Aaron, he had no idea.

The chick bent closer and pressed the top of its beak, where its nostrils were located, to his hair. It sniffed.

“What does it want?” Aaron said.

“I think he wants you to return his affections,” Cassie said.

“His affections?” Aaron said. “What affections?”

“Make the same sound back to it,” Cassie said.

“What sound?” Aaron said, unable to take his eyes off the chick.

*Wark!*

“That sound,” Cassie said.

“You can’t be serious,” Aaron said.

A similar call came from above their heads. One of the parent birds circled above them. Cassie could see their one chance of escape slipping through their fingers. The bird descended at a sharp angle toward them.

The chick turned to look at these matching figures approaching at high speed from the sky. They would stand no chance of bringing the bird to their side if Aaron didn’t make the noise. Cassie stepped forward.

“Wark!” she said. “Wark wark!”

She flapped her arms and bobbed her head, mimicking the chick to the best of her ability. She turned to watch the chick’s reaction. The chick watched her, but evidently her performance wasn’t to the chick’s liking. It turned back to Aaron, twisting its head to one side, and made its customary inquisitive *Wark?*

“You’re the one who has to make the noise,” Cassie said to Aaron.

“I’m too young to be a mother!” Aaron said.

“But you’re not too young to die?” Cassie said. “Because that’s what’s going to happen to us if you don’t repeat its call.”

“I don’t want to die!” Aaron said.

“Then make the sound!” Cassie said.

The Humungo parents were swinging in low now, coming in to land. If the bond wasn’t sealed now they would have no chance. They would be stuck here. Likely, dead.

“Do it!” Cassie said. “Now!”

“Wark!” Aaron said. “Wark wark wark!”

He danced like a fool, flapping his arms and making a show of himself. His life depended on it. The chick turned its head to one side, peering at Aaron with confusion, and yet rapt with fascination. It was hard to read the young chick’s facial expressions.

“What have you done?” Aaron said. “Have you cast a spell? A love spell?”

“If I could do that I would have gone to the prom with David Ryan and not Debra Sayer,” Cassie said.

“What’s happening to me?” Aaron said. “Did you spray me with some kind of seed pheromones or something?”

“Seed pheromones?” Cassie said. “What are you talking about?”

“Why is this chick so into me?” Aaron said. “Is it really confused, do you think?”

“No, nothing like that,” Cassie said. “I remembered something from a biology lesson once.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Aaron said.

“Shut up!” Cassie said. “Though to be honest, I was surprised too. It was about imprinting, how young birds—ducks?—I can’t remember—developed a kinship with creatures that weren’t their biological mother. And I thought, what if the chick sees you first, before it sees its mother and father? Might it think you’re its mother and not want to harm you?”

“Why me?” Aaron said. “You’re female. You’re more motherly than me.”

Cassie arched an eyebrow at him.

“Or maybe not,” Aaron said. “Good idea. It’s likely to be the only way we’ll get out of this alive. But I wish it didn’t have to be me who had to be the caring one.”

“Who else would you suggest?” Cassie said.

Aaron pursed his lips.

“Good point,” he said.

The bird parents came in to land, extending their legs and flapping their wings to slow their approach. It still seemed strange to Cassie to see such large birds with relatively small wings come in to land like that. Their movements were smooth and choreographed with thousands of similar landings.

Cassie picked up on their aggressive stance immediately. They weren’t playing games, not any longer. They were here for the kill. They had harvested all these resources for their chicks and now they were going to get used. Chief amongst the resources would be the two living humans.

The nest shook with thudding footsteps as the parent birds marched with matching footsteps toward Aaron and Cassie, one on either side, like henchmen on the warpath to avenge their fallen comrade. Only now they had found the man responsible for his death. There was no way they were going to overcome them.

Cassie and Aaron said a prayer under their breaths, unable to take their eyes from the twin images of death heading directly for them. Aaron and Cassie were forced backward, toward the eggs lined up like soldiers, ready to defend them should the enemy encroach too far and close. A feathery deathsquad. The dark feathers about their eyes were blindfolds, their sharp talons their weapon of choice.

*Wark!*

The newly hatched chick came to a skidding halt between Aaron and Zoe on one side and the birds on the other. It bucked its legs and stamped its feet, making rattling, menacing noises. The parent birds warbled in response in a questioning tone. The chick ducked its head and bounced on its toes. It was ready to put up a fight.

No one was more surprised by the sudden turn of events than the bird parents themselves, who stood with confused expressions, looking down at Aaron and Cassie as if they had cast some kind of spell on their little chick.

The parents turned and headed away, casting harried glances at their lost baby. The chick rubbed its face against Aaron. *Just like a cat.*

“Can someone please tell me what’s going on?” Aaron said.

He was staring uncertainly at the chick.

“He thinks you’re his mother,” Cassie said.

“Lucky me,” Aaron said. “I hope it doesn’t expect milk.”

“Birds don’t get milk from its mother, you idiot,” Cassie said. “And I thought you were meant to be the smart one.”

“Regurgitate, then,” Aaron said. “Whatever.”

“Comes with the territory, I’m afraid,” Cassie said. “At least until it realizes you’re not his mother. Then we’re for it.”

Cassie had bought them a little more time. Perhaps not a lot, but some.

# 20.

STURGESS HAD never experienced fear before. He didn't know if it was a weakness or a strength, but it was certainly something that distinguished him from the rest of the miners.

Miners by their nature were hardy people. They had to enter the abyss, the dark, without knowing what might lie inside it. And they had to hack at the very substance that kept them safe, the very material that kept the roof over their heads. A wrong stroke, and the cave would fall in upon them.

But even they felt the filament of fear glint in their heart when they heard the ominous creak of the surrounding earth begin to give way. Sturgess, for better or worse, didn't even feel that much fear. He trusted himself to get out when and if the need arose.

There was nothing he had ever been afraid of… And yet, deep in the pit of his stomach he began to feel something, something he had no prior experience of. At first he took it for indigestion, a discomfort deep in his chest. But it persisted, and he found it was attached to some disconcerting thoughts.

"You've got that look in your eye," a voice said.

Sturgess turned to find his wife, Greisha, standing with her hands on his hips. One weakness of not feeling fear was not being able to sense what it was his wife was really saying. A man's ability to read between the lines was stunted when he didn't fear what his wife was saying.

"I'm just thinking," Sturgess said.

"I know you were," Greisha said. "And it never leads to anywhere nice."

"I might surprise you," Sturgess said.

"That you would," Greisha said.

She sighed and approached her husband. She wrapped her arms around him and held him close.

"I might not be able to read," she said. "But I can read *you* like a book."

"I was just thinking about what Bryan and Zoe said to us, about not having to put up with what we have here," Sturgess said.

"I know what you were thinking," Greisha said. "But what we have here isn't so bad, is it?"

“It’s not about that,” Sturgess said. “I’m happy with you, you know that.”

He put his hand to her stomach.

“But it’s not just us we have to think about,” he said. “We have to think about his future, what he might want to do. I don’t want him to be a miner, to have no choice but to follow in my steps. My father didn’t want that for me either, but he didn’t do anything about it.”

“But you will?” Greisha said.

“Maybe,” Sturgess said. “If I don’t, who will?”

Greisha pulled back and looked her husband in the eye.

“Don’t forget what happened to Key,” she said. “He wanted to make a change too, and the only change he made was not returning to his wife and child.”

“You don’t think I remember?” Sturgess said. “He was my best friend.”

“When you talk like this, no,” Greisha said. “I don’t think you do remember.”

“He gave his life for us,” Sturgess said.

“He gave his life for himself,” Greisha said. “He was selfish.”

“He was trying to help us, save us, protect us,” Sturgess said. “Any man worth his salt would have—should have—done the same thing.”

“Then there would have been two husbandless wives instead of one,” Greisha said. “Please, just drop it. I can’t stand to lose you.”

“And you think I could stand to be the kind of man who just sits back and lets the world—our future—get destroyed?” Sturgess said. “You could respect such a man? Could continue to love him? I couldn’t stand to be such a man. Never. And I could never subject you to his weakness.”

Greisha had never known such an outburst from Sturgess. He was always so quiet and tight lipped. Now he had spoken openly to her about his emotions.

“Those surface dwellers had quite an impact on you, didn’t they?” Greisha said.

“I need to go for a walk,” Sturgess said. “Get some fresh air.”

He stepped outside without waiting for her response. He shut the door behind himself and breathed in the warm air laced with dust. It scratched the back of his throat, and then he realized the sensation had nothing to do with the dust, but the burning onset of tears.

Sturgess turned to head back into his home, and then decided against it. He turned back two more times before he took a deep breath, exhaled, and decided to head away, into the night.

The village was quiet. Tents glowed with the soft ethereal lights of candles, and shadows of families played on the walls. There was so much good here, so many good people, so much they still had to achieve, and yet Sturgess couldn't shake the feeling he had in the pit of his stomach.

He drifted within sight of the giant Gravitas boulder they had discovered. It was the largest fragment they had ever found. The Merchants would be happy. Or would they? It was hard to tell. It had been so long since they had had much correspondence with them.

This wasn't the first time Sturgess had had his reservations. He'd suggested they stop mining, stop sending Gravitas to the Merchants, but he'd been shouted down. So long as the Merchants continued to send food, they would continue to send Gravitas.

Sturgess spent the rest of the night walking. That was what he did when he needed to think deeply on a subject. He walked and walked and walked, until he looked up and realized he didn't know where he was. Then he turned around and continued his walk back to camp. He always found his way.

Sometimes, if the problem was big enough, he would walk all night, arriving just a few minutes before work began the next day. His wife would give him his breakfast and they would both walk toward the pit.

She would always give him the same expression, the same look on her face that showed how she didn't understand why he did what he did, only that she supported him in his need to do it.

Bryan and Zoe had continued on their journey. Sturgess didn't know if they would find what they were looking for. He only hoped they would. It was a terrible thing to lose your children, and to have them taken from you like that was never easy to overcome.

Sturgess wished them all the best and understood the challenges they faced in reaching the nest. Many a miner child had been taken by the birds in the past. It had happened a great deal in the past when there were many more Humungos. Over the years they had gradually been wiped from the face of the world and replaced with the magma and red hot lava.

Sturgess feared that was precisely what was going to happen to the miners too. They would do their utmost to protect themselves, but at times

there was precious little you could do when the world turned its back on you. Something had to be done about it, and soon.

Sturgess's thoughts revolved unceasingly inside his skull. He was chipping away at the great Gravitas rock, slipped, and struck his own foot, slicing his little toe in half. He'd long since learned how to block the pain from such wounds. Greisha was on hand to aid him.

"Where is your mind today?" his wife said.

"Up in the clouds," Sturgess said.

"You keep having accidents like this, the rest of you will be sliced up there too," Greisha said.

"You have such a way with words," Sturgess said.

"Tell me what's on your mind," Greisha said.

"Nothing," Sturgess said, though the word was hard fought in his throat.

His wife arched an eyebrow, but she didn't pry. She knew he would tell her if he wanted to discuss the subject.

"It's just…" Sturgess said. "I never thought we would be here. I never thought we would be stuck here like this."

"We have friends, family, a home, food, a baby on the way…" Greisha said.

"The stories Bryan and Zoe told us, about all the things they had achieved and done, the education they have, the kind of things their children can do compared to ours…" Sturgess said. "Do you think that's how the Merchants live?"

Greisha's eyes narrowed.

"What do you expect to achieve with such questions?" she said, her voice low.

She tied off his bandage, a little tighter than she needed, and leaned forward to kiss him on the knee.

"What I fear, what I dread with every fiber of my being, is the day we wrench too much Gravitas out of the earth and it destroys our world," Sturgess said. "When we can't go back, ruined the only world we have ever known. We must rebel. It's our only chance."

He spoke in a low voice, like he was uttering a dirty word within hearing of his parents. Greisha cast a look over her shoulders.

"You'll get something, if you're not careful," Greisha said. "Some of the others will take any opportunity to take advantage to get what they want."

“The Merchants don’t keep an eye on us the way they once did,” Sturgess said.

“What are you thinking?” Greisha said, eyes wide.

“Lava spills from the world like blood,” Sturgess said. “One of these days we’re going to inflict a mortal wound, one the world will never recover from. And that’ll be it. It might even be this lump of Gravitas. It’s big, larger than any we’ve extracted up till now.”

“You’re worrying about nothing,” Greisha said. “None of that has ever happened.”

“You’re right, it hasn’t,” Sturgess said. “But that doesn’t mean it won’t. There are signs, if we only open our eyes to see them. The Humungos have been disappearing, the temperature has gotten hotter, and it’s tougher to survive. Don’t you think it at least has something to do with the Gravitas we’re extracting from the walls?”

“No,” Greisha said. “So maybe Gravitas mining does have something to do with it. But then again, maybe it doesn’t. How can we know?”

“By stopping,” Sturgess said. “And seeing what happens. If the world recovers, we’ll stop. If it continues to get worse anyway, then we haven’t lost anything.”

“Except our only source of food,” Greisha said.

“Better than our only home,” Sturgess said. “We’re miners. We can survive.”

“This decision, if you make it, you’ll be making for all of us,” Greisha said. “It’s fair if everyone has a chance to cast a vote.”

“No,” Sturgess said. “Not everyone will agree with what we have to do.”

Greisha shook her head.

“This is wrong,” she said.

“And yet I’m going to do it anyway,” Sturgess said.

“If you’re going to do this, you’d better not do it alone,” Greisha said. “Better to share the blame if you can.”

“So you’re giving me your blessing?” Sturgess said.

“Is there any point in trying to stop you?” Greisha said.

“No,” Sturgess said with a grin, and wrapped his arms around his wife. “But it helps that you’ve got my back, as always.”

“Forever and always,” Greisha said.

# 21.

NEITHER CASSIE nor Aaron would leave the chick's side. They couldn't, not if they wanted to stand a chance of survival against the fully grown Humungos. The problem was, the parent birds never left the hatchling alone either, nor their other eggs, after their first had been swiped from under their beaks. They had no intention of losing the rest of the hatchlings the same way.

But that didn't stop Cassie from making plans to take possession of the rest of the hatchlings herself, to build up her defenses. They would need to marshall their resources if they were to be successful in distracting the parent bird on duty, so they might get in close enough to whisper the magic 'wark' password in the hatchlings' ear and bypass the tens of thousands of years of evolution and hijack the creatures.

Their giant chick had a small tuft of purple feathers on the top of his head. He leaned down and rubbed it against Aaron, who ran his fingers through the thin plumage.

"He's not so bad," Aaron said, scratching the chick behind the neck.

"He'll get bigger," Cassie said. "Try not to get too attached. We're out of here the first chance we get."

"I know," Aaron said, before grinning like an idiot and scratching the chick's belly.

Each time the parents attempted to lure the chick away, Cassie and Aaron were on hand to keep the chick with them. The parents eventually gave up attempting to get their kid back. In truth, Cassie suspected they knew the chick would eventually return to them anyway. There were too many differences between Aaron and the chick for it not to realize the truth one day.

But it hadn't realized yet. Aaron and Cassie gave what little food they had to the little chick. There was little else they could offer, but that, along with a whole lot of love and affection, appeared to be enough. For now.

It worked like a charm, and the little chick ignored its biological parents. Cassie kept a close eye on the eggs, on how the cracks were

forming, how they were weakening. Once they hatched, Cassie had no idea what would transpire. But it likely wouldn't be in their favor.

"You know we can't rely on your little chick forever?" Cassie said. "Once his brothers and sisters wake up he'll realize there's something wrong with him."

"Not necessarily," Aaron said.

"Yes, necessarily," Cassie said. "And if he doesn't follow them, they will attack him and kill him."

"Why?" Aaron said. "He's just a baby."

"They're wild animals," Cassie said. "They don't think like that."

"You don't know how they think," Aaron said. "They've evolved differently down here than they have up on the surface."

"They aren't writing books or making movies," Cassie said. "They haven't developed that much. Evolution still operates down here, and nature still has a foothold on how things go."

The bird is following Aaron, like he might really be his mother. Aaron puts his fingers down his throat.

"Are you choking?" Cassie said.

"No," Aaron said, pressing his fingers down his throat again.

"Then what are you doing?" Cassie said.

"Making myself sick," Aaron said, dry heaving.

"What for?" Cassie said.

"To feed Wayward," Aaron said.

"Wayward?" Cassie said. "What's that?"

Aaron nodded to the chick.

"You named it?" Cassie said.

"Everyone should have a name," Aaron said.

"Why Wayward?" Cassie said.

"Because his eyes point in different directions," Aaron said.

"This is a bad idea," Cassie said.

"This whole thing is a bad idea," Aaron said. "Anyway, I think he likes his name."

He turned to the chick.

"Don't you, Wayward?" he said.

"Don't call him that," Cassie said.

"Too late," Aaron said.

Cassie clenched her fists and growled. Aaron choked on his fingers again.

“What are you doing now?” Cassie said.

“Feeding him,” Aaron said. “You said I need to regurgitate for him.”

“I was joking, you sicko!” Cassie said.

“Oh,” Aaron said. “I thought it was a good idea.”

He put his fingers to the back of his throat again.

“Will you stop doing that?” Cassie said.

“Wayward’s hungry,” Aaron said.

“So, give him some food!” Cassie said.

“I think he prefers his meals like this,” Aaron said.

“Mash it up,” Cassie said. “It’s practically the same. Here.”

She dropped to her knees and put some of their food in a bowl fashioned from the hood of a giant acorn, and set to mashing it up with a short thick stick, turning it into a paste.

Wayward crowded around, watching. He rested his chin on Cassie’s shoulder. Cassie shrugged him off. Wayward tweeted, moving to Cassie’s other side. He put his head on her shoulder again. Cassie sighed.

“I’m certain he’s yours,” she said. “He has your irritating traits.”

Finished, Cassie stood up and moved to an area of the nest they had designated as Wayward’s feeding location. She spooned the paste onto the floor of the nest. Wayward was on it before Cassie had time to shovel it all out.

“Wait a minute!” Cassie said.

But it was no good. Wayward knocked Cassie aside, sending her sprawling. He scooped the food up and straightened his neck. The food ran down his gullet. He ate like this until he’d eaten it all.

“He’ll get big fast,” Cassie said.

“There’s no time to waste in this place, I guess,” Aaron said. “You get big and strong fast, or you die.”

“But this has to be some kind of record,” Cassie said. “He only hatched a day ago.”

“I saw a documentary about gazelles,” Aaron said. “They take a day to learn to stand, and the next day they can run faster than a racehorse.”

“Wayward isn’t a gazelle,” Cassie said.

“But the same ability to grow fast might still work,” Aaron said. “All it takes is the right stimulus.”

“We’ll be able to fly away on him at this rate,” Cassie said.

She blinked. Sometimes the best ideas came from the blue. She turned to look at Aaron.

“We could fly him away from here!” she said.

“Not for some time, I should think,” Aaron said.

“Will you let me have this moment of self delusion, please?” Cassie said. “Thanks.”

“Self delusion doesn’t help anyone,” Aaron said. “That’s what Mrs. Fletcher used to say.”

“It helps me,” Cassie said.

It felt strange to think about a teacher from the surface. Cassie wondered what she was doing at that moment. Maybe she was marking papers, tests, or preparing more classes. It might have been the middle of the night and she was fast asleep. But none of that mattered much to Cassie. It did her good to think of the surface, of the life she had inhabited, the kind of person she had been. So petty, small minded and superficial. She didn’t know where that girl went, but she knew she wasn’t present any longer.

Cassie and Aaron were alone. They had to rely on themselves if they were to get out of there. But how?

# 22.

“GET DOWN!” Zoe said.

“What for?” Bryan said.

“Just do it!” Zoe said.

Bryan frowned and turned to look around. Zoe reached up and dragged him down.

“Hey!” Bryan said. “So I’m down. Now what?”

“Now we creep and peek over the side to see if it’s still there,” Zoe said.

“If what’s still there?” Bryan said. “Will you tell me what’s going on?”

Zoe didn’t. She crawled on her hands and knees to peer over the side of the mound they were hidden behind, careful not to raise her head too far. When Bryan looked over the side, he immediately lowered his head back down again.

“It’s one of the big birds,” Bryan said.

“Yes,” Zoe said.

“What is it doing here?” Bryan said.

“Why don’t you go ask it?” Zoe said. “Who cares what it’s here for? It’s here. That’s all that matters.”

“Is it one of the ones that took the kids, do you think?” Bryan said.

“How should I know?” Zoe said. “But it might be able to lead us back to wherever their nests are.”

“So what do we do now?” Bryan said.

“We do what it tried to do to us before,” Zoe said.

“We carry it away?” Bryan said.

“We catch it,” Zoe said, exasperated. “And then we ride it, or at least get it to lead us to its nest.”

“Sounds great,” Bryan said. “But how do you suggest we do that?”

“We leverage the element of surprise,” Zoe said. “We jump on it when it’s least expecting it.”

“But what does that look like in real life?” Bryan said. “In real, manageable steps?”

“It looks a lot like an ambush,” Zoe said after a moment’s thought. “Are you ready for this? We’ll get to our feet, run over the side and jump on it.

It’ll be surprised and won’t respond quickly.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Bryan said.

They got to their knees, standing as high as they could under the circumstances, and looked at one another. They blew out a puff of air and then nodded. They got to their feet and ran over the bluff. They didn’t shout or scream, and only pumped their legs to run as fast as possible.

They were rounding the crest when the bird began to notice them. It was a little earlier than Zoe would have liked, and partially negated their advantage, but there was no way around that, except to run faster.

The large bird turned and flapped its wings. It didn’t know what it was doing, in a panic. It spun on the spot, its eyes wide and scared. It squawked and flapped its wings, turning tail. Zoe didn’t know if it was the same Humungo bird or not, one that had taken their babies, but she was willing to take the risk and follow it in any case.

They waved their arms. The bird did likewise. It was going to take off if they didn’t hurry. They needed to be quick if they wanted to get the drop on it. It had several large rocks in its mouth, scavenging amongst the ruins at its feet.

Zoe pushed herself hard, throwing her arms back and forth in a swinging motion, forcing her legs out as long as they were capable. She gained on the great lumbering beast. It was going to take off soon.

“No!” Zoe screamed as she threw herself forward.

She tried to grip the bird by the neck, missed, and couldn’t reach it. She grabbed it instead by the wing. The bird honked and turned its head to snap at her. Zoe pulled her head first one way, and then another in an attempt to escape its snapping jaws. It kicked and flapped to get loose, and each time it succeeded in pulling away, Zoe was there to pull it in again, getting it back under control.

She was going to lose control. And it would fly from her grasp. The bird was just too big and powerful. She couldn’t maintain her grip.

Bryan leapt and grabbed a length of vine from an overhanging tree branch. He pulled it free. He snapped it loose and looped one end, never breaking stride. He ran at the bird and tossed the slipknot over its head to its collarbone and pulled. The rope caught and pulled tight. The bird was big and kicked Zoe and Bryan away with its thick feet.

The bird flapped its great wings and began to pull away. The rope slipped through Bryan’s hands. He gripped tight, hands snapping around

the last inch of rope. The rope pulled up vertical. Bryan grunted as he rose off the ground, floating like he had his own set of wings. The bird squawked, shunting back, but only flapped harder.

Zoe chased after Bryan, grabbing at his legs. She could only reach his pants. They pulled down as the bird pulled away. Bryan couldn’t hold on any longer, daren’t hold on, or else get carried away like the kids had been. He let go, and fell to the ground.

Zoe was following close behind, trailing the rope. She tripped on Bryan and fell over him.

They looked up to see the bird flap and rise into the darkening sky.

# 23.

THE LATEST shipment of Gravitas was prepared, piled high on the delivery platform. It would rise into the sky at midnight, to deliver to the Merchant's warehouse. None of the miners had ever seen the warehouse, but they all imagined a huge facility with thousands of workers picking over their findings.

This haul had been organized by Sturgess himself. He'd altered it in such a way as to provide him with a small space to hide. It was large enough for half a dozen miners, but he wasn't yet sure who would be joining him.

The platform was the only piece of Gravitas they had that they didn't need to send to the Merchants. It was square and flat with no distinguishing marks. It was large, twenty-five yards square. Every week or two the village would stack their haul of Gravitas onto it and it would automatically rise into the sky at the stroke of midnight. It would float into the sky, rising ever higher until it was lost from view, and then it would return again by the next morning.

What the Merchants used Gravitas for, none of the miners knew. There were rumors, of course. How wild the rumors were depended on who you spoke to. That was one reason why Sturgess, when he called the secret meeting, had been careful not to invite the more unstable personalities. Despite all their complaints, they would fight to the teeth to protect the lifestyle they had. When you had very little, you tended to try to protect what you did have.

The team leaders gathered in the mine after hours, away from prying eyes. If anyone was going to do anything, it was from within this room. Looking around now, it was difficult for Sturgess to envision these men and women picking up the mantel. There were even one or two he thought might even make things difficult for him.

"So, what are we here for?" Old Man Marley said.

"I've called a meeting," Sturgess said.

"That much we can see, thanks," Old Man Marley said.

They had to keep their voices down, for fear of attracting attention. Only Old Man Marley, with his natural croaky voice, didn't have to alter how he spoke. Of all the team leaders, Old Man Marley held the greatest sway. It was him the others listened to when there was any doubt. His years of experience had led them well in the past, and they all assumed his instincts would continue to do so in the future too. But what they faced now wasn't a cave-in or a stubborn rock no one else could shift. This was about something greater, the world, and Sturgess didn't know if Old Man Marley could see that far.

"Times are tough," Sturgess said. "It's getting harder and harder to harvest Gravitas, harder and harder to meet our quota, and we have to dig deeper and deeper to get it. It's resulting in this magma being released into the world, and one of these days it's going to be too much. It's going to burst, drowning us."

"Poppycock," Old Man Marley said. "It's never happened before. Why should it happen now?"

"Because it is already happening," Sturgess said. "And has been for a long time. You know I'm right. You've all seen the warning signs. We have to try. We have to do something. We can't go on like this. We can't live this way, knowing what we're doing to this world, knowing we're destroying the only home we have, the only way we can survive. And yet we're doing it anyway, because we fear those who we work for. But they don't care about us, what happens to us. They likely don't even know what's happening here."

"What would you intend on doing?" Old Man Marley said.

"We tell them the way things are down here, how we're suffering," Sturgess said. "We won't have much of a world if we don't stop. And they won't get anything back from it either. No more Gravitas."

"We've told them what it's like down here before," Old Man Marley said. "And look where that got us."

"Key," Sturgess said. "He tried to speak to them, to warn them, about what was happening down here. We all stood and watched him do it, speaking to the Merchants' guards."

"And we all saw what happened to him because of it," Old Man Marley said. "My daughter still has nightmares about it."

So did Sturgess, but not for the same reason as Old Man Marley's daughter.

“We should have stood up for him,” Sturgess said. “We should have been his axe, should have defended him when he needed us. We’re strong, brave people. We go into the darkness where others fear to tread, we break boulders and destroy mountains. But we lack the courage to stand up to our oppressors. We need to rebel.”

Upon the word ‘rebel’, all the team leaders burst out, speaking at once, running over one another. Half were for the motion, the other half against. Sturgess raised his hands to quieten them, but they were too busy in their heated debate. Only Old Man Marley said nothing. He sat thinking deeply, eyes focused on Sturgess.

Finally he stood up, and the others quietened down. He directed himself at Sturgess.

“And what’s to stop them from doing to us what they did to Key?” he said.

“When was the last time we saw the guards?” Sturgess said. “When was the last time they were here?”

“That doesn’t mean they don’t see us,” Old Man Marley said. “They have ways.”

“Then they will come down to meet us, and we will speak to them,” Sturgess said.

“And if they don’t?” Old Man Marley said.

“Then we’ll go up to speak with them,” Sturgess said.

More muffled whispers amongst the team leaders.

“You would undertake this?” Old Man Marley said, fixing Sturgess with a squint.

“I would,” Sturgess said. “But I do not wish to go alone. Our voices will be more easily heard if there is more than one of us.”

“And what if they ignore us again?” Old Man Marley said.

“Then we’ll have to come up with another plan,” Sturgess said.

Old Man Marley turned his head to one side. His watery blue eyes saw a great deal more than they let on.

“But you already have a plan, don’t you?” he said.

“Yes,” Sturgess said.

“What is it?” Old Man Marley said.

Sturgess looked the team leaders over. With what he was going to say next he might well be committing suicide. If one of them felt the need to inform the Merchants, he could very swiftly find himself in hot water.

“We’ll force them to listen to us,” Sturgess said.

“How?” Old Man Marley said.

“We use force,” Sturgess said. “First we tell them we will no longer mine for them. Then, we’ll use weapons to remove them from power.”

The team leaders gaped at Sturgess, open mouthed. They couldn’t believe what they were hearing.

“They have guards,” Old Man Marley said.

“We don’t know how many,” Sturgess said.

“They have training,” Old Man Marley said.

“Have you ever seen them use their weapons?” Sturgess said. “I haven’t.”

“I can’t sit here and listen to this,” a tall fellow called Robin said. “If anyone hears what we’re saying…”

“Sit down,” Old Man Marley said.

He didn’t need to shout. Robin hesitated only a moment before sitting back down.

“You’re serious about this?” Old Man Marley said.

“Yes,” Sturgess said. “The stakes are too high. We could lose this whole world by our own reckless actions. And if we don’t do something now, if we don’t take action, we could lose it all. We have to be successful. Otherwise there’s nothing we can do to stop what is happening here. We can still fix it, but we have to hurry.

“There’s no telling when this will affect the whole world and we’ll never be able to go back to the way things once were. You’ve all seen what we’ve done to the world. You’ve all experienced it. You all have families who will suffer if we don’t do something today, right now.”

Sturgess swept his eyes over the assembled. He could tell his words were having an effect. There was nothing for them to say, because what could they say? They agreed with everything he’d said.

“When are we doing this?” Old Man Marley said.

“Tonight,” Sturgess said. “We’re doing this tonight.”

# 24.

THE SPACE inside the mound of Gravitas on the extraction platform was a tight fit with all six team leaders inside. With any luck they would be back to the village by the following morning. At least, that was what Sturgess had told his wife Greisha. She'd been upset upon hearing his plan, but she understood.

"I'll be back soon," Sturgess said. "And then we can get back to living our lives. I promise."

Greisha nodded, but couldn't stop the tears running down her face. Sturgess knelt down and pressed his cheek to her bulging stomach.

"And you," he said. "You'll be the ultimate winner in all this. You'll become something else, not just a miner."

He kissed Greisha's stomach and stood up. He hugged Greisha close and kissed her on the forehead.

"I'll be back in no time," he said. "You'll see."

Sturgess moved outside and weaved between the tents toward the Gravitas platform. The rest of the team leaders were already there waiting for him.

"Hey," Robin said. "I thought we weren't supposed to bring family here?"

Sturgess turned to find Greisha approaching.

"I told you to stay home," he said. "If anyone was to see you…"

"I had to wave you off," Greisha said. "I'm sorry."

The other team leaders crawled through a hole in the side of the huge mound of Gravitas, entering the space Sturgess had carved for them. Sturgess ran his fingers over Greisha's smooth skin before turning and following the others inside. Greisha handed some food in through the hole.

"You'll get hungry," she said. "Just like a man not to plan properly."

"Thank you," Sturgess said.

"You come back to us," Greisha said.

"I will," Sturgess said.

The platform juddered and the whole mound of Gravitas jolted under the movement. Greisha waved to Sturgess, tears already streaming down

her cheeks, as Sturgess slid the shutter over the hole.

They were locked in near total darkness, but they were used to that. It did not contain any fear for them. The platform rose vertically, with barely any shaking or rocking movement. It hummed like a well oiled machine.

Robin peered out through a gap between two large sections of Gravitas. He gasped at what he saw.

“You fellas have got to see this,” he said.

But none of them were much in the mood to see what so amazed him. He soon shut up, turning silent, save for his intermittent gasping.

“I can’t believe none of you want to see what’s outside,” Robin said. “Something life changing like this, you only get to see once in a lifetime.”

“We’ve been heading up all night,” Old Man Marley said, shaking his head. He looked paler than usual. “I can’t believe how high we must be.”

“You wouldn’t believe it till you come look with your own eyes,” Robin said.

“You can describe it to us,” Sturgess said.

“We’re so high that-” Robin said.

“Later,” Old Man Marley said. “When I won’t be sick.”

They finally broke open Greisha’s lunchbox when all their stomachs were rumbling. They munched away quite happily. Sturgess, happy at first at the scent of his wife’s cooking, quickly turned sad.

The thing about living in a small village your whole life was you quickly got used to being around the same loving people. When you weren’t there, you missed them terribly. You hung onto their memory and hoped you would see them again, as soon as you could manage. Your heart hurt with physical pain.

There was no remedy save to close your eyes, shut them tight, and let the sweet memories wash over you. Sturgess could tell by the serene silence that the others were thinking along the same lines. It was just as difficult for them. They were all in the same boat, or rather, on the same platform. At least it was a smooth ride.

Then they began to shift, quivering like an earthquake.

*An earthquake in midair? Yeah…*

The platform swung side to side. Some of the rocks dislodged and fell on the miners’ heads. The others hollered at the top of their voices, indistinct words.

The platform slowed, coming to a stop. The men glanced at one another, tentatively reaching out to hold themselves in place.

“Thank goodness that’s over,” Robin said. “For a second there I thought the whole thing was going to-”

The platform spun on its axis. Sturgess felt his stomach press deep inside himself, like it was shifting position. He was going to be sick. By the smell, someone else already had been.

Had the Merchants discovered they were inside? Had they tossed the Gravitas out? Were they going to die? For the second time on the journey, Sturgess shut his eyes tight and looked for solace in his memories. He found it in Greisha’s arms.

# 25.

THE RAIN came out of a clear blue sky. It hissed when it spat on the hot rocks.

“In here,” Bryan said, waving Zoe over.

They entered the cave. Zoe took off her clothes and began wrenching them dry. The heat was oppressive. It wouldn’t take long for them to dry.

“Hello?” Bryan said to the darkness. “Is there anyone in here? A bear maybe?”

There was no reply.

“I guess that means it’s empty,” Bryan said.

“Or the bears here don’t speak English,” Zoe said.

Bryan gathered a clump of grass together to form a small pile. He picked up a dry stick and headed outside. He stabbed it into a river of magma and withdrew it. He held a hand over it to protect it from the rain as he brought it inside. He touched it to the kindling. The flames leapt to life.

“Look at this,” Zoe said. “Wherever we go down here, we always seem to come across these things.”

Bryan turned from nursing the fire. Figures were painted on the walls, in a similar, but different, style to those they’d seen in the previous two worlds.

“I guess people have always liked to record themselves, their history and story,” Zoe said. “No one likes to be forgotten.”

“No,” Bryan said. “But you would have thought some of these places wouldn’t find the need to keep a record of every single thing they’ve ever done.”

“True,” Zoe said. “Then again I guess they all tell pretty much the same thing, don’t they?”

“Yes,” Bryan said. “There’s nothing particularly surprising about these images.”

“Just a preserved piece of our shared past,” Zoe said. “Nothing particularly amazing about that, is there?”

“Just a bunch of stickmen with yaks,” Bryan said. “I’ve seen enough of those to last a lifetime. Why aren’t there any great works of art?”

“This may well have been,” Zoe said. “In its day.”

“I suppose so,” Bryan said. “But then, great art doesn’t ‘have a day’, does it? That’s what makes it great in the first place. It’s timeless.”

“Wait,” Zoe said, leaning in closer to the cave paintings. “I remember seeing a similar figure drawn on the walls of the caves we saw in the first world we came to. And in the water world too, come to think of it. This guy here.”

She pointed to a cowled figure in black. It might have been a smudge if it wasn’t for the pains taken to ensure it had a clear shape against the browns of the cave’s innards.

Bryan frowned at the image.

“Are you sure?” he said. “It’s easy to mistake it for something else, don’t you think?”

“It’s the same figure,” Zoe said. “I swear.”

But could she have been mistaken? The cowled figure could all too easily have been a patch of shadow from a misshapen wall. She shook her head. It was all in her imagination. How could the same figure turn up on all three walls? The three peoples had clearly never made contact before. How was it possible?

“What would the same image of a guy in various worlds even mean?” Zoe said.

“Beats me,” Bryan said. “Maybe it’s just a nightmare, or something all the people thought about over the years.”

“Possibly,” Zoe said. “There is evidence on the surface of the Epic of Gilgamesh story having appeared simultaneously in various parts of the world that, as far as we know, didn’t have any contact with each other.”

“Or it was a real person,” Bryan said. “Someone who visited all these worlds in the past.”

The thought sent an irrational shiver up Zoe’s spine. It was spooky. She could tell it gave Bryan goosebumps too.

The rain slowed to a dribble, noise bounding off the hard rock wall. They needed to crack on. It was unlikely knowing who, or what, this figure was would have much of an effect on them getting out of there. And so they pressed on.

They climbed a steep hill to the top. They descended down the other side, slipping and sliding after the recent rainfall. The landscape was altogether different to what they'd come across before. The land was bleached white, like salt. It looked warm, like a beach in the Caribbean.

"This doesn't look so bad," Bryan said. "Like we might almost be on holiday."

He took a step forward and immediately regretted it. His foot sank into the sand to the knee. He stumbled and took a step back. His other foot found another sunken patch. He attempted to push down with one foot and pull up with the other, and only succeeded in making both feet sink deeper.

"Bryan, take my hand!" Zoe said, reaching for him.

He did, but it didn't do any good. Zoe tossed him a vine, edging as close to the quicksand as she dared. Bryan took hold of one end and yanked on it, but Zoe's feet weren't as securely planted as she thought. She slid forward and entered the quicksand. Now they were both in trouble.

"This is great," Bryan said. "This is just peachy! How are we meant to get out of here now?"

"Don't panic," Zoe said. "Stay calm. We'll figure a way out."

"My brain is all out of ideas," Bryan said.

"We just need to focus," Zoe said. "There's always a way out. There's a way out of everything."

Bryan and Zoe were shunted around in a circle, getting sucked into the quicksand deeper and deeper, toward the center, farther from the edges, from escape. The slow realization of truth, a dawning terror of their predicament, began to seep into their bones.

They were doomed.

The quicksand began to overtake them, tickling their noses and delicate skin of their cheeks. They held one another's hands as they were sucked beneath the surface. It had happened so quickly, so fast, they hardly had time to process what was happening before it overtook them. They shut their eyes and mouths. It did little to diminish the rushing roar.

They were deaf and dumb to what was going on around them. They felt only the grit between each other's clasped hands as they sank deeper beneath the surface. They said a prayer for their own sakes, as well as for Aaron and Cassie, at having failed them, at having taken a false step. They had failed.

Then something bizarre happened. They began to rise up from the depths. They breached the surface and gasped through their mouth and nose, spitting out a mouthful of grit.

“What’s going on now?” Bryan sputtered.

“I have no idea,” Zoe said. “But let’s not squander it. Let’s get out of here.”

They came back around to the outer rim, within snatching distance of a clutch of vines. Zoe seized one and pulled herself, arm over arm, out of the quicksand. She tossed the vines back at Bryan. He was already beginning to sink back below the surface. His hands tightened around the vine and he pulled himself back up, above the surface. He gasped for oxygen.

Zoe pulled at the other end of the vine. Soon, he was out. They lay on the edge of the pit gasping for air.

“Don’t you hate when you get sand in all your crevices?” Bryan said.

Zoe gave him a flat stare and a shake of her head. She covered her mouth and let out a relieved laugh. This world’s weird properties had worked in their favor for once.

# 26.

THE PLATFORM slowed, locking into place, jolting to a stop. Robin screamed. There could not have been much oxygen left in his body to expel in the form of screams. He had screamed solidly for the past twenty minutes. They were deaf with his yells.

“Robin!” Sturgess said. “Will you shut up?”

“Is it over?” Robin said, his eyes clenched shut.

“It’s been over for the past ten minutes,” Sturgess said.

“Do you think we’re there?” Old Man Marley said.

“If we’re not, we’ve taken one hell of a diversion,” Sturgess said.

“Sh!” Robin said. “I think I hear something.”

The others assumed he was just imagining things, the way he always seemed to. He was perhaps the only miner in the world afraid of the dark, even going so far as to imagine hearing things. Certainly an occupational hazard, Sturgess thought. He would make sure to keep a close on him when they returned to the village and began mining again.

Mining.

It was then that Sturgess realized they might well be out of a job, or at least life wasn’t going to be the same from now on. They were essentially on a mission to eradicate anything they might recognize as their livelihood. They would need to find some other way to support themselves. But what? A miner knew how to mine. There was little else they were capable of. He pushed those concerns aside when he turned his thoughts to the footsteps he heard outside.

They crossed from one side of the platform to another, inspecting it perhaps. The others were as silent and unmoving as Sturgess suddenly found himself, listening to every sound, reacting to it like the Gravitas might explode, exposing them to the elements any moment.

The footsteps headed away and they were left alone. But still they didn’t speak, not until Sturgess plucked up the courage to break the silence.

“He’s gone,” he said.

“Don’t speak!” Robin said. “He might still be out there, waiting for us.”

“He’s gone,” Sturgess said.

“You don’t know that!” Robin said. “They might be lying in wait for us!”

“In which case we’d be better served if we meet them and get it over with,” Sturgess said. “Besides, since when have you ever known the Merchants to get their hands dirty?”

“Shut up, will you Robin?” Old Man Marley said. “And for heaven’s sake, grow a pair!”

Robin grumbled under his breath, half a whimper, but he was quieter after that.

“We need to get out of here,” Sturgess said.

Judging by Robin’s expression, he was quite happy to stay where he was. But that wasn’t going to result in them finding the Merchants, nor their message getting delivered.

Sturgess edged forward on his hands and knees toward the hole he’d covered when they’d first set off on their journey. He pulled it free and peered out. He made out blank walls and mounds of rubble similar to the one they were hiding in, but little else.

He reached out and gripped either side of the hole and pulled himself out, sliding onto his back. He extracted his legs as fast as he could, not liking to have his torso half hanging out the way it was.

As the others pulled themselves out, Sturgess appraised their surroundings. They were in a large room, with dozens of rubble mounds like the one they had ridden to get there. He leaned over and could see there were more mounds beyond the ones he first identified. There had to be hundreds of them, all sitting there, stretching into the darkness. One thing was for certain: whoever was there earlier was gone now.

The other team leaders looked like scared children, unwilling to face their fears.

“It’s safe,” Sturgess said. “There’s no one else here. We’re alone.”

They were apprehensive, and for obvious reasons. It wasn’t every day you took an express elevator, to find yourself in the world’s biggest Gravitas warehouse. The miners were out of their element. There was nothing remotely similar to the mines they were used to harvesting.

They edged forward with shuffling steps in the small pools of light cast by bright lights on the ceiling.

“Those must be some of the brightest candles I’ve ever seen,” Old Man Marley said, cupping his hands over his eyes and looking up at where the

light emanated from.

“I don’t think they’re candles,” Sturgess said. “There’s no flicker.”

“Then what do you suppose they are?” Old Man Marley said.

“Something else,” Sturgess said.

“They could do a lot of good in the mines, don’t you think?” Old Man Marley said.

“That they could,” Sturgess said.

They were playing for time, discussing things they all felt comfortable with. But they needed to press on, into the darkness and the unknown.

They walked between the huge mounds of Gravitas on either side of them, emerging out into a large open space. Sturgess turned to find Old Man Marley staring at the mounds.

“These are our rocks,” he said. “These are the Gravitas rocks we dug up.”

“More than just what we dug up,” Sturgess said. “There are rocks from mining camps all over the world, all brought here, to the biggest room in the world, and then left… But for what purpose?”

“None by the look of it,” Old Man Marley said.

Then an idea occurred to Sturgess.

“Do you know what this means?” he said.

“That I’ve wasted my life doing something for no particular reason?” Old Man Marley said.

“We knew that already,” Robin grumbled.

Sound carried in the warehouse. Old Man Marley glared at Robin, whose eyes went wide.

“No,” Sturgess said. “It means we might be able to reverse everything we’ve done. If we can get these rocks back to the surface, we could replace them in the world’s walls, bury them, and everything will be as it was. Gravity will return to normal. And with time, maybe even the animals will come back.”

“Or maybe nothing might happen,” Old Man Marley said.

“Maybe,” Sturgess said. “But it has to be worth a try.”

“Going back, undoing all our good work,” Old Man Marley said, shaking his head.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” Robin said. “We can’t exactly take it with us.”

“We can,” Sturgess said. “But first we need to figure out just what’s going on here.”

“I say we get out of here,” Robin said. “We’ve seen what they do with the Gravitas. Let’s go.”

“We came all this way,” Sturgess said. “The least we can do is get some answers to our questions. You can go if you want. But I’m staying.”

That comment brokered no argument. A miner never left a fellow worker behind.

Sturgess pressed on into the darkness, moving in a random direction. It was as good as any direction, he figured. He wasn’t going to stop until he came to the way out.

He walked for what felt like a long time, but it was probably only a few minutes. Just when he thought perhaps he had better head in another direction, that there was nothing this way, he bumped into something. It was hard and unyielding.

In the mines he could rely on his senses to tell him he was getting close to something, judging by the sounds that refracted off the hard walls, but he wasn’t used to this place yet.

“There’s something here,” Sturgess said to the others.

He hadn’t felt what it was yet, but he sensed it was something large and hard. He held out his hands and felt at the cold darkness. It didn’t yield under his fingertips. He had to keep moving. He flinched, pulling back when his fingertips were impaled by thick splinters. He put his fingers in his mouth, felt his skin with his tongue, seized the splinters, and pulled them out, spitting them to one side.

Sturgess put his fingers back to the tall wall and felt along the grooves he felt there, more careful this time. He was certain it was a door. He pushed and pried at it. The others joined him in his investigation, and identified large lengths of wood that were held in place by metal hooks. They lifted them and tossed the barricade aside. They made hollow thud noises as they bounced on the hard concrete floor.

“Moment of truth,” Old Man Marley said.

They formed a line and pushed at the doors, using every muscle they’d developed over the years. The doors, heavy and unyielding, creaked, finally giving way. Early morning sunlight spilled through the crack, blinding them. They blinked against it.

Nothing could have prepared them for what was waiting on the other side.

# 27.

CASSIE AND AARON munched on another lackluster meal of tough rat meat and fruit skins. Cassie wasn't sure if the food gave them more energy than it took to consume it, but it was sustenance of a sort. Aaron sucked the fruit from its skin and lay the empty shells on top of one another.

It was a bizarre-looking fruit, like a banana, but twisted like the fingers of a weeping willow. The fruit had bruises. The strange thing was each mark was reflected on the other side, forming a bruise of equal size, even if both sides hadn't been struck.

"Why do you think it does that?" Cassie said.

"Huh?" Aaron said.

"The skins," Cassie said. "Why do you think they reflect the bruises on the other side like that?"

Aaron shrugged. He had his mind on other things.

"I don't know," he said. "Who cares?"

Cassie shrugged.

"It just seems weird," she said. "And it's boring sitting here watching you work on your jigsaw puzzle."

Aaron nodded with no expression. He was ignoring her again, his mind back on the map. Cassie growled.

"Will you just talk to me for a few minutes?" she said. "Do you really think it'll make a massive difference if we chat for a while?"

"What?" Aaron said. "What do you want to talk about? Some fruit skins? If you didn't notice, I'm trying to help us get out of here. I haven't got time to talk about fruit skins. Maybe they're two halves of the same coin. Maybe the skins are actually two organisms and it's their way of communicating with one another. How should I know?"

"I was just curious," Cassie said. "I've been sitting here for ages, and you've just been staring at lumps of rock. They probably won't help us get out of here anyway."

"But they might," Aaron said. "You can't know that. Neither of us can, till we give it a try."

“Fine,” Cassie said. “You waste away in front of the puzzle while I defend us from the world. Great plan.”

Aaron turned away from her and stood facing the map. He did just as Cassie had said. She hadn’t been serious. She didn’t want him to turn away from her. They were meant to be working as a team, meant to be figuring a way out of there, but instead they were just wasting time.

And then Aaron froze. He was halfway through taking a step and almost fell over. He gasped out loud.

“No…” he said. “It can’t be.”

“What?” Cassie said. “What is it?”

Aaron moved around the map, stepping over it and frowning, turning his head to the side to figure out what it was telling him.

“Aaron!” Cassie said, finally losing her patience. “What is it?”

Aaron looked up. He had a big grin on his face. He approached Cassie, and before she could stop him, he wrapped his arms around her shoulders, squeezed, and kissed her on the cheek.

“Are you freaking crazy?” Cassie said, twisting loose.

“Yes, I just might be,” Aaron said. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

“Exulting,” Cassie said. “What have I done to demand such attention?”

“You’ve solve the riddle!” Aaron said. “With your stupid, pointless conversation topic-”

“Easy on,” Cassie said.

“-you’ve solved it!” Aaron said.

“I’ve never solved a riddle in my life,” Cassie said. “How is it I’m supposed to have solved yours?”

“Come and take a look,” Aaron said, hopping back over to the puzzle spread out before them. “I’ve been working on piecing these two maps together, right? Well, what if they aren’t really two maps at all. What if they’re just one?”

“I thought you said they couldn’t be two maps,” Cassie said.

“They can’t,” Aaron said. “But they can.”

“You’re making absolutely no sense,” Cassie said.

“Look at it this way,” Aaron said. “It’s like the fruit skin. Sometimes one side has an effect on the other. If you look at these maps you can see they’re the same. They are a mirror reflection of one another. Where there’s a lake of lava on one side, there’s a fissure on the other. Where there’s a mountain on one side, there’s a small rise on the other. They’re

not always exactly the same in size and scope, but they're always in the same place."

Cassie frowned. She still wasn't getting it.

"Don't you see?" Aaron said. "They're two sides of the same puzzle! That's why the map we were building looks like it is made up of two maps. Because there *are* two of them."

"How can there be two of them?" Cassie said. "So, one is for the past, the other for more recently?"

"No," Aaron said. "They're both recent. The modern day."

He picked one map up and placed it one on top of the other. He had to be careful. It was still delicate.

"That's it," he said.

The two images fit together, but it still wasn't clear to Cassie what it was meant to be depicting.

"There's an up and a down," Aaron said. "When we arrived here, we arrived on one side of the world, on one map. The birds picked us up and carried us toward their nest here, but on the way they spun in the air, do you remember?"

"I remember almost spewing my guts," Cassie said. "So, yeah, I think I can recall it."

"That's it," Aaron said. "That was why they performed the little spin in the air. The gravity shifted, from one world to the next. From up to down."

"So, where are our parents?" Cassie said.

Aaron thought for a moment, and then stood up. He looked at the sky, the roof of their world.

"Up there," he said. "They're up there in the sky, only to them it's not the sky, it's the ground. And to them, we're in the sky. The world's gone topsy turvy."

"You can say that again," Cassie said.

# 28.

IT HAD once been a perfect utopia. There had once been beautiful houses here, with lounging lawns and gorgeous water fountains. But they were no longer lived in. They were decrepit and misused. Nature had already begun to reclaim them, slipping its fingers through the heavy ugly concrete human structures. No one had lifted a finger to slow the process.

“They hardly have any guards here,” Robin said.

“Thanks for stating the obvious,” Sturgess said.

“It’s my role,” Robin said with a shrug.

The streets were festooned with horseless carriages that had been left to rust. The miners peered through the windows at this advanced technology, uncomprehending what it was they were looking at, no concept of what it was or how it was used. But they recognised the rocks, rounded and polished to a high shine on the vehicles’ underside. It was Gravitas, and the Merchants appeared to use it at every opportunity they could find.

The vehicles hovered a foot off the hard black tarmac, unmoving and silent. Doors had been thrown open and whoever had been the former owners were now nowhere to be seen. By the look of the city they might not be found anywhere. The miners brushed against the vehicles, causing them to drift forward, like slippery butter on a hot plate.

The miners continued on down the road. Shops lined either side of the streets, full of items none of them had ever seen before. Everything appeared to be made using Gravitas as a chief component.

Did the residents here know where the Gravitas came from? Did they know what it cost the miners? Did they even care? It was hard to believe anyone could know such things and continue with their lives. Surely someone would have let the truth be known, would have spread the word so everyone knew others were being exploited. But there was no evidence of that, only the opulence and utopian lifestyle people were used to living here.

Soon, the detritus-ridden streets gave way, and the miners passed through them like extras in a post-apocalyptic movie. It got worse, with

blood splatter explosions over walls and house fronts. There was little that wasn't damaged. Newspaper pages blew over the vast empty expanses.

The morning light was beginning to catch up to them, but the sky was still an attractive deep ocean blue. The stars winked at them, bright and twinkling. And now that Sturgess looked at the stars, his brow drew down into a frown.

The stars were altogether different to those he saw from his village. But how could that be? He searched the sky for the constellations he'd grown up with, but couldn't locate them. It was puzzling.

Finally they came to a building, larger than the others, with a huge 'G' on its front. Underneath it was written, 'Gravitas: Meeting All Your Energy Needs'. The miners recognized the Gravitas company emblem as the same etched on the platform they piled with Gravitas every day.

The Gravitas building at least looked shiny, new, and well taken care of. It was constructed of metal and plate glass, a construction the miners had never seen before. They were drawn to it, not least because it had been their backs that supported the foundations of this magnificent building. It was their hard work that had built it.

Some of the glass plates had been smashed, tiny star-like fragments glinting on the floor. The metal was bent, twisted, and melted. Some of the Gravitas vehicles had smashed their way into the building.

The miners shared uneasy expressions. They expected for this world to be advanced and sophisticated, to be untouched and without blemish—it was where the Merchants lived after all. How could they live in such squalor?

"We ought to turn back," Robin said.

"Turn back?" Sturgess said. "We're almost there."

"There's not going to be anybody here we can speak to," Robin said.

"We won't know unless we look," Sturgess said.

"How do we even know the person we want to speak to is here?" Robin said.

"We're in Gravitas headquarters," Old Man Marley said. "It's the ideal place. And if it's not, someone here might know where we should go."

"The whole town is gone," Robin said.

"We're going to do what we set out to do," Old Man Marley said. "We're not turning back now."

That ended the argument.

They ascended the stairs to the top floor. It was a long way, and they were out of breath by the time they got there. Their bodies were hard and muscular, used to pushing themselves. They could have scaled the stairs of any large building, but this place, at least, was something they could all cling to. Despite being exploited by the company, they were at least familiar with it. It was a part of them.

They came to a huge office that took up the entire top floor. It belonged to the CEO. His name was Ratchett Duke. There were drawings and impressive works of art on the walls, with futuristic blueprints. They brought a sense of excitement to the space. They fluttered, disturbed by the broken full-length window behind the oak desk.

“What did I say?” Robin said. “No one here. Just like I said there wouldn’t be. Now can we go?”

“And who, may I ask, are you?” a voice said.

They turned to find a heavyset smock-wearing man with wobbling chins. He was rotund and balding and hadn’t shaved in a month. The majority of his whiskers were grey.

“We’re the miners,” Sturgess said. “You must be Mr. Duke. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Ratchett,” the Merchant said without thought. “The miners?”

His eyes had a faint and distant cast to them.

“Miners from where?” he said.

“From the north wall,” Sturgess said.

“The north wall?” Ratchett said. “You’re miners from the north wall?”

“Yes,” Sturgess said, gesturing to his body.

It would have been pretty obvious to anyone Sturgess was telling the truth if they had just taken a moment to look down and check out Sturgess’s getup. Finally Ratchett did look down. His eyes registered surprise. He recovered himself, but it was too late to hide his shock.

“I see,” he said. “Would you care for a drink?”

It was such a strange thing to ask that Sturgess didn’t know what to say at first. He let the question wash over him. He didn’t know what he was supposed to say. Then he nodded.

“Please,” he said.

“Your friends?” Ratchett said.

“Please,” Sturgess said.

He’d been prepared to hate the Merchants. They took with no remorse, and no hint of giving back. Instead he’d found a vaguely likeable man. He was old, older than perhaps even Old Man Marley, but the miles didn’t show up so obviously on his face.

Living to an old age was a sign of skill and hardiness in the pits, where you might get squashed or destroyed at any moment. There was no knowing when your last breath might be, and so you tended to savor each one as you drew it into your body.

Ratchett moved to a drinks cabinet and poured them each a cut glass of whiskey. He handed one to each man and invited them to sit on the sofas in his office. They did, sinking into the most comfortable seats they had ever rested their behinds on.

Robin moved to the window, looking out at the impressive view. He sipped on his whiskey and sputtered, half choking. He glared at the liquid before turning back to Ratchett.

“Bourbon,” Ratchett said with a grin.

Robin goggled the bottom of his glass and threw his head back, swallowing the rest of the liquor. The others sipped and reacted the same, but didn’t enjoy it half as much.

“Good?” Ratchett said.

Robin nodded vehemently.

“Cheers,” Ratchett said, supping on his own whiskey as if it was water. “Now, would you care to tell me what you’re doing here?”

“We came because we’re worried about what we’re doing to the world,” Sturgess said.

“The world?” Ratchett said. “We’ve been doing this for years and now you come to see me? Why not sooner?”

“Because we didn’t know if we could come here,” Sturgess said.

Ratchett made a fart sound with his lips.

“Try again,” he said.

“Try what again?” Sturgess said.

“Spinning me another lie,” Ratchett said. “Or perhaps you’re spinning them for yourself.”

Sturgess frowned.

“You’re right,” Ratchett said. “That we destroyed the world. But it was merely our idea. It was you and your villages who carried it out. If we’re guilty, so are you.”

“The difference is, we admit our part in all this,” Sturgess said. “And we’re ready to make amends. Our hands aren’t clean, but our conscious is.”

“So, it’s a confession you’ve come to hear,” Ratchett said.

“And a way to fix the world,” Sturgess said.

“Fix the world?” Ratchett said. “I’m afraid it’s too late for that. And what good will an apology do you now?”

“It would be a start,” Sturgess said.

Ratchett blinked and looked Sturgess over. He allowed himself a small smile.

“Very well,” he said. “You shall have your apology. We were each of us merchants. Merchants of death. Nothing more. We have taken everything from you. We have taken your homes, your purpose, your self respect. Your future. That is perhaps the worst of all.

“We took everything from you without letting you know we’d done it. An inadvertent kindness, perhaps. We’d done it to your ancestors, your parents, and would have continued to do it to your descendents if it wasn’t for our most powerful flaw: greed.

“We have played our part, and we played it exceptionally well. Too well, in fact. There is nothing more we can do. I apologize for the way we treated you and your people. There was no reason to divide us up the way we did. Do you realize we were once all prosperous, once upon a time?”

“Yes,” Sturgess said. “We’ve passed that knowledge down from generation to generation.”

“It’s true,” Ratchett said. “Then we got a nasty case of greed. It was given to us, implanted, by a sinister force known as the Cursed One. He came to us, the Merchant Council, one day. We took him in, a weary traveler from a distant land. We made him a deal. He was going to make us richer than we had ever dreamed. The only thing we needed to do was leave the weaker elements of our world behind.

“We were equal once. We performed different duties, felt tired in different ways—physically or intellectually—but we all worked together. We put our effort together, and sometimes our efforts paid off big, other times it paid off small. But we relied on each other.

“The Cursed One took all the good we’d built, the envy of the world, of every world. He turned it to ruin. And we let him do it. We let him turn us into what he wanted us to be, into what he needed us to be. He found us to

be weak, pliable material, easily manipulated. All he had to give us in exchange was some useless gemstones he no longer had need for.

“And so here we are, in this position, stuck. We didn’t even know what we were doing till it was too late. We made the decision to create a hierarchy, and since then the world has been suffering for it. We became rich and powerful within our own world, but what difference did that make? There was nothing to use it for. We were stuck here in our own little world, and I suppose that was what he wanted.

“We were the top dogs of our society, of our little social spheres, and nothing else mattered. It was a perfect system. We were at the top, and would do anything to maintain it, to never lose or slip down a rung on the social ladder. That was what really destroyed us, but it was the Cursed One who instigated it all.”

“But you destroyed yourself,” Sturgess said. “What happened here?”

“The question is, what didn’t happen?” Ratchett said. “You have entered the viper’s pit, the place where every sin, every pitfall, that can befall a human soul has occurred. There is nothing here, no act of betrayal the human race is capable of committing, that has not happened. It’s just as well we destroyed ourselves. There was no way we could return to the purity we once possessed. But you can.

“You can leave this place and never return, return to the earth, land and nature, where you can commit our same sins, or you can commit your own. I give you your future, your freedom, back to you. And with it comes a responsibility: to promise me you will get payback for what was done to us and our world, for you to destroy the Cursed One. For you to show the kind of courage we did not, could not. I pray you’ll do what needs to be done. That is, if it isn’t too late.”

“You sold out the lives of our entire village, for this?” Sturgess said, gesturing wide to the opulent office.

“Yes,” Ratchett said. “I told you it wasn’t something you would welcome, that it would not be something you would find inspiring. But it would be the truth. It seemed so important at the time, handfuls of yellow metal and shiny jewels. And then when I had it all, and my enemies were destroyed, I was left with this, everything I had ever dreamed about, ever wanted. And I felt… nothing. Emptiness.”

“You want us to feel sorry for you?” Sturgess said. “We told you what was happening to the world and our home, but you took no notice and

carried on, even punishing us if we were delayed. Why?"

"Because that was what it all became about," Ratchett said. "I didn't want to do it any longer, wanted to end it, to finish our arrangement, but the Cursed One told me I could not end it, told me there was no way to take back our agreement, that I had to keep providing Gravitas.

"He… He's unlike anyone I've ever met before, driven by an obsession I've never seen before. He won't stop, not while his goal still remains unobtained. I was afraid, for myself, for my loved ones, for everything I have managed to grow and accumulate over the years.

"An idea can be more dangerous than a well-maintained army. An idea can spread, fast. There's no armor that can stop it, nothing to prevent it from digging deep into the mind. It can infect anyone anywhere, and at anytime. And once it stabs its claws into the flesh it is difficult to relinquish its hold once it has reached a certain depth. By then it is usually too late.

"It takes time for a man to be dangerous with a weapon, but a man can instantly be made dangerous if he subscribes to a certain ideology. That is what makes ideas and intellectuals so dangerous and hard to control, and what ultimately defeated us."

"Didn't anyone care about us?" Sturgess said. "There must have been someone in your city that felt something for us, regret or guilt, that showed some kind of remorse for what was done to us."

"No," Ratchett said. "Or if they did, they were quickly muffled. The people have little power, using it only when they mobilize. Something they do rarely, because we are at the reins. Though they have been known to buck at times."

He picked up a heavy chest, a few gold coins spilled from it and rolled across the floor.

"Your ancestors kept the truth of your past remarkably intact, but there are some things they have allowed to be forgotten," Ratchett said.

He was standing at the large broken bay window, looking out at the sky. The final few stars glinted and winked out, giving way to the birth of a new day.

"The stars," Ratchett said. "Beautiful, aren't they? But they're not the same here as they are in your village, correct?"

Sturgess nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I did notice."

“There’s a very salient reason for that,” Ratchett said. “Can you guess what it is? I wouldn’t blame you if you couldn’t.”

Sturgess looked at the stars and shrugged.

“Because we’re in a different part of the world,” he said. “Things will always look different from another perspective.”

“Yes,” Ratchett said. “And no. Let me give you a little clue. Those things up in the sky that twinkle so beautifully, the things you say your prayers to each night, they aren’t really stars at all.”

Sturgess blinked. It was like someone had just told him two and two didn’t equal four, that the person he’d called his father his entire life wasn’t related.

“What?” Sturgess said.

“They’re not really stars,” Ratchett said with a smile.

Sturgess could tell the Merchant was enjoying this revelation.

“What are they?” Sturgess said.

“They’re villages,” Ratchett said, turning back to look at the final few blinking lights. “They’re towns and cities and small encampments. Your village will be one of those blinking lights. You see, the world is divided in half. Half live up there, half live down here.”

Sturgess physically stumbled, stepping back and almost falling over. He gripped the back of an armchair. The others were sat down, and seemed to sink further into the chairs’ leather upholstery.

“No,” Sturgess said. “No, it can’t be.”

“It is,” Ratchett said. “You came here via the platform, did you not? Didn’t you notice a little shift and shake? That was gravity switching from one side of the world to the other. You spun on your axis, turning upside down. Only for this world, it is the right way up.”

Sturgess shook his head. It was a lot to take in. Why hadn’t his ancestors considered that to be important enough to pass on to their descendents? Why had it taken a Merchant to tell them this? It would have made a difference to them and their culture, he was sure. To know they were part of something bigger, that the people they were praying to were the same they also worked for. Maybe that was what the Merchants had planned all along.

“If what you say is true,” Sturgess said. “It’s worse than we thought. There’s not just the mining camps we’re aware of, but dozens of them,

maybe hundreds, all over the world. They're destroying our world faster than we thought, all in an effort to support your greed."

"Tragic, isn't it?" Ratchett said. "The Cursed One's plan was a runaway success. We found people liked to be sheep, liked to follow. We could never pull it back, could never bring the world back to the way it was, because in their heart of hearts, they were all happier in their new situation."

"We weren't happier," Sturgess said.

"No," Ratchett said. "There are exceptions to every rule."

"How could we have not noticed the stars for villages?" Sturgess said.

"You don't see what you're not looking for," Ratchett said. "It's our weakness too. If only we had stopped and thought what effect our actions would have had on the world…"

He shook his head. The guise of a man with a great deal of deep regret. The Merchant was not at all what Sturgess had envisioned of the ruling class. He was human, with human flaws and wants and dreams and regrets. He was just a man.

"Do you know how long a human can survive in this world?" Ratchett said.

"In the pits, a few decades," Sturgess said

"A human can survive but forty or fifty years," Ratchett said. "It's better to live that time in as much comfort as possible. That's the only difference between us, really. Our level of comfort. If someone gives you the opportunity to live like a king, to live better than others, aren't you obliged to take it?"

"Not if it leaves others in the doldrums," Sturgess said.

"We saw a way to live as comfortably as we dreamed," Ratchett said. "As comfortably as anyone would have wished if they had the chance. My ancestor was given that opportunity. And he took it. It meant dividing our world in half, it meant making the most of what we had, the most of the resources at our disposal.

"'There is something of value in every world,' my father was fond of saying. I often wondered how he could know that given he had never set foot in another world besides our own before. The only logical answer was it came from the lips of the Cursed One.

"It doesn't matter where you live or what you do for a living, there is always something people want. Usually it's food and water, and that was

certainly true here, until we had enough of it and then we desired more things. We wanted gems and jewels and things of refined taste. We catered to these desires. You do the best you can for those you care for."

"And evil to those you do not need to care for," Sturgess said. "Your leadership has finally come to an end."

"You think you were the unlucky ones, having to mine for rocks, but you are wrong," Ratchett said. "You were the lucky ones. When you have saturated the market, when there is no one else to get money from, you turn on each other, your former business partners. A war between the rich and powerful took place.

"We dug for Gravitas, deeper and deeper into the earth. But that wasn't the only place we dug. We found reserves of greed in our own hearts that we never knew existed. But greed is one resource that cannot exist in a vacuum, and relies on destroying the reserves of others.

"And it can't stop until it has completely destroyed the reserves of every other person who desires what it wants. Greed defeats all, until eventually there is nothing that remains but fear and disgust. Because it cost you not only everything you have, but everything your loved ones have too.

"You should certainly be afraid of what is happening to our world. Eventually you will dig too deep, grasp a little too far, and you're going to learn the wrath a world can have upon innocents who did little more than follow orders, doing what they had to in order to survive."

"Is that what you're trying to do with us now?" Sturgess said. "Trying to survive?"

"No," Ratchett said. "My fate is the same as our world. I must give the only thing I have left."

He picked up the heavy chest of gold, the coins spilling over the side, and threw himself out the broken window.

# Rosetta #3

IT WASN'T the first time Rosetta wondered if perhaps Admiral was playing a joke on her. She was standing perched on the edge of the great swirling whirlpool. The spray hit her face, stinging. If there was anything that made you feel awake it was the feeling you were about to die. The swirling vortex of terror was unlike anything she had ever seen before. She looked up and locked eyes on Admiral.

"Are you having a laugh?" Rosetta said.

But she figured if this Admiral wanted her to commit suicide, there was a much easier way of getting her to do it than the one he had decided to force upon her—by taking time out of his presumably busy schedule and escorting her all the way across the ocean, into dangerous waters that were apparently still being run and owned by renegade pirates.

At first Rosetta couldn't believe pirates still existed, but that was before she saw her first Jolly Roger. That was quite enough for her to realize her mistake.

"You join us at quite an unfortunate moment in our history," Admiral said. "You see, the king died recently. We all knew his weight would kill him one day. We had to stage a rather hasty coronation of the next king, and he wasn't quite ready to be crowned just yet. We are still going through a period of transition."

To say Rosetta was surprised by the age of the new king was an understatement, but she found herself to be nonetheless impressed by his maturity and sense of self. He also seemed to have a good sort in the form of his elder brother, Admiral, who maintained the right kind of mentorship for the good king.

The king excused the rest of the court when Rosetta entered the Great Hall. Once his lords and ladies had vacated, his countenance changed immediately. He bounced in his throne like the child he was.

"You knew Bryan, Zoe, Cassie and Aaron on the surface?" he said.

"Yes," Rosetta said. "Uh, Your Majesty."

"Don't bother with the formalities," King said.

Admiral frowned at the young king, but the boy shrugged the look off.

“No one knows her,” King said. “So no one can use or take advantage of her as she will be off soon.”

Admiral still wasn’t appeased, but he bowed and allowed the motion to be carried.

“How were they when you last saw them?” Rosetta said.

“Tired,” King said. “But otherwise in good shape.”

“When was this?” Rosetta said.

“No more than four days ago,” King said. “It feels a great deal longer than that, I must say.”

“It gets faster the older you get,” Rosetta said. “Something for you to look forward to.”

“Nice to know,” King said.

“I need to go wherever the family went,” Rosetta said. “Can you help me?”

“Yes,” King said. “I don’t see why not. We can charter a boat and get someone to captain it to the Demon Isles.”

“The Demon Isles?” Rosetta said.

“There aren’t any demons there anymore,” King said.

“That’s a relief,” Rosetta said with a frown.

*Anymore?* she thought. *Are these people for real?*

“But there was one thing I wanted to see, if you don’t mind?” King said.

His eyes shifted to Rosetta’s arm that hung limply at her side.

“Of course,” Rosetta said.

She pulled up her sleeve and showed the exposed metal, the fake flesh largely torn off due to her various escapades, hanging like torn shreds of meat from a mauled limb. The metal was clear, and when Rosetta moved each individual finger, the machinery moved inside. King climbed down from his throne and approached Rosetta.

“May I?” he said.

“Sure,” Rosetta said, surprised at his level of manners.

“Wow,” King said. “Do many people have arms like this on the surface?”

“A few,” Rosetta said.

“I’d replace my whole body with technology like this, if I could,” King said.

“Don’t say that,” Rosetta said. “I wouldn’t lose a finger, much less an arm, for any price.”

King nodded.

“I suppose you’re right,” he said. “It’s still cool though.”

“It’s the kind of thing you could be capable of down here one day,” Rosetta said. “And you’ll achieve it much faster than we did, if you make the changes necessary.”

“Changes?” King said. “We’re already teaming up with the pirates. You’re saying we have more enemies?”

“Yes,” Rosetta said. “It’s because of them that I lost my arm. The enemies of reason are the ones you have to fight most, and the hardest to defeat. The human mind is a primitive thing in many ways. It is only by embracing the modern world that we can overthrow the old. But it’s not easy.”

The world was evidently going through a tumultuous period. *Just my luck*, Rosetta thought. The lost world she’d originally entered the world beneath the Earth’s crust had been going through a period of change too. Was it all a coincidence?

Rosetta had managed to slip away from the monkey men in that first world. They’d been determined to treat her as some kind of goddess. She’d managed to get them to follow her through the forest and in the direction of a giant crack in the wall on the opposite side of the world.

As she approached the crack, her apemen followers became skittish and nervous. Why they should become nervous would soon become apparent, as she pushed through the foliage and came face to face with more modern men, who she would have mistaken for Native American Indians if she hadn’t known better. It was they who helped her through the Passage and into this world. She’d been thankful at the time, but now she was perched on the edge of the great abyss, she wasn’t so sure anymore.

She straightened up and looked Admiral in the eye. He had a funny little smirk on his face. Rosetta extended her arm and aimed a middle finger at him. His grin faded while Rosetta’s grew.

She jumped.

# 29.

THE ROLLING dunes met the hard wall on the left, stretching off into the distance like a great dome. There was nothing there, not even a forest. And certainly no mountain. Bryan and Zoe were silent a moment as they took the area in.

“There’s supposed to be a mountain here,” Zoe said, lowering the map Sturgess had given her. “Did they lie to us?”

“Why would they?” Bryan said.

“Then where is it?” Zoe said. “A mountain isn’t exactly the kind of thing you can easily miss.”

“Unless it doesn’t look like a mountain from our perspective,” Bryan said.

“And what does that mean?” Zoe said.

“It means, we’ve seen how gravitationally challenged this world is,” Bryan said. “What if this is just another quirk?”

“You’ve lost me,” Zoe said.

“Is it just me, or is that stalactite the biggest one you’ve ever seen?” Bryan said.

He pointed up. Zoe frowned at what he was pointing to. She still didn’t see it. Bryan bent over and looked between his legs, upside down.

“All is revealed,” he said.

Zoe turned her head to the side. What she saw took her breath away. Hanging from the ceiling was a giant triangle of land in the classical mountain pose.

“It’s the mountain!” she said.

“Yes,” Bryan said. “And more than that, look at what’s on the top of it… Or, the bottom of it.”

Zoe squinted and spotted what Bryan was referring to. It looked like a sprig haircut, sticking up at right angles on the top of a skinny man’s head.

“It’s a nest!” Zoe said.

“Yes,” Bryan said.

“You think they’re there?” Zoe said.

“Yes,” Bryan said. “I can see them.”

Zoe needed her glasses. She couldn’t make them out, but she was willing to believe Bryan’s twenty-twenty vision. Bryan cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted. There was no response from the figures.

“This is the most surreal thing I think I’ve ever seen,” Zoe said.

“I’ll second that motion,” Bryan said.

“How are we going to get to them?” Zoe said.

“I don’t know,” Bryan said. “But we’re going to have to hurry, whatever we do. It looks like they’re in trouble.”

# 30.

THE EGGS began to crack open at the same time, as if they were all pre-installed with the same activation timer. Only Wayward's timer had been faulty.

"The glue!" Cassie said, scooping up the bowl with the sticky paste inside. "We have to seal the eggs!"

She and Aaron ran toward the eggs. They got halfway across the nest when all shell hell broke loose. The shells imploded, spilling shards across the floor. A flapping sound like the propellers of a helicopter thudded overhead, and the kids skidded to a halt.

A flash of vibrant green, and a parent bird screeched and landed, blocking their approach to the hatching eggs. The Humungo reared its head back and snapped forward, aiming her huge beak at these pesky tasty morsels.

Cassie and Aaron dived to either side, avoiding the strike. Cassie rolled onto her feet. Aaron hit the ground hard, skidding. It wasn't difficult for the parent bird, who peered down at them with her black inquisitive eyes, to decide which morsel was easiest to hunt.

*Wark!*

Cassie could make out the fluffy multicolored feathers of the chicks inside their protective cases.

"They've already hatched!" she said. "We have to try to imprint them now!"

Aaron was slow to react from his hard fall. He wobbled on his feet, unstable. The parent bird was already taking aim with her beak and preparing to bring it down. Cassie was too far to save Aaron directly. She hurled the bowl of glue at the parent's huge head.

*Squark!*

The bowl struck the bird on the side of the face, spilling the glue over one side of her beak. She flew back in surprise. She attempted to open her beak, but the glue held it shut tight. She scratched at her beak with her clawed feet.

Cassie ran to Aaron and helped him to his feet. She led him back toward the back of the nest. The other chicks were emerging from their cocoons, a couple of them upside down and kicking out with their feet. Another one ran around with the remainder of its shell over its head like a bulletproof vest that had been put on incorrectly.

The mother parent bird scratched at her face a few more times before she straightened up. The glue hung in fragments from her face. Now she sported a few deep gashes from her own talons. She hissed through the nostrils on the top of her beak and peered down at Cassie and Aaron.

“I think it’s about time we get out of here, don’t you?” Cassie said.

“How?” Aaron said.

# 31.

IT’S AMAZING how often coincidence and fate intertwine. This is perhaps the main reason why the human race so often ascribes meaning to things that are nothing more than incredible acts of coincidence. Right at that moment, on the direct opposite side of this world, a seemingly insignificant event was taking place.

In the mining village that until recently Sturgess had never set foot outside of, Sturgess’s wife Greisha was stirring in bed, finding it difficult to fill her time without preparing her husband for the day ahead.

She was saved by a knock on the door. She answered it to find Axel, the foreman, standing there. She knew she would have to face these questions if Sturgess didn’t return home by morning.

“Good morning,” Axel said through his crocodile smile. “Is Sturgess in?”

“Yes, but I’m afraid he’s sick,” Greisha said.

“Oh,” Axel said. “I’m sorry to hear that. Will he be present today in the mine?”

“No,” Greisha said. “He’s too sick to even lift an axe.”

“That’s a shame,” Axel said. “I have to admit, I’ve never known Sturgess to take a day off sick before.”

“Then you must know it’s serious,” Greisha said.

“Can I see him?” Axel said.

“It’s best if he rests,” Greisha said, bracing the door with her shoulder.

“Of course,” Axel said. “You know, it’s strange. Sturgess isn’t the only one to be sick today. In fact, almost all the team leaders are ill. I haven’t gone to check on Old Man Marley yet, but I suspect he’ll also be down with this sickness.”

“They’re team leaders,” Greisha said. “Maybe they had a meeting, one of them was sick, and spread it to all the others. It’s not the first time an illness has spread through the village.”

“No, not the first,” Axel said. “But the first to isolate itself to such a small and easily identifiable group of individuals.”

Greisha knew there wasn't anything Axel could do to her. The worst he could do was spread rumors. Sturgess and the others would return soon, resume their positions, and things would continue on as if nothing had taken place. But until then they had to deal with the likes of Axel, as well as nosy neighbors, who would do everything they could think of to get inside Greisha's home to see what was going on.

Axel checked over his shoulders before taking a step closer.

"Is something going on here?" he said. "Something you might want to tell me about? Something I should know?"

Greisha shook her head.

"No," she said. "Sturgess is sick, that's all. He'll be up and about in a day or two."

Axel nodded, frowned, and took a step back.

"I see," he said. "And until then, we're all meant to sit around and wait for them to get better?"

"That's about the thrust of it," Greisha said.

Axel pursed his lips. Then he looked Greisha straight in the eye.

"No," he said. "I don't think I will."

Greisha blinked.

"What do you mean?" she said.

"Precisely what I said," Axel said. "There's no need for the rest of us to get in trouble with the Merchants if there's no need. We won't be blamed for this."

"That's against protocol," Greisha said.

"I think you'll find I'm well within the rules," Axel said. He quoted from memory. "'If the number of team leaders is equal to, or less than, half the number required to sufficiently manage all teams, the foreman may assume control and continue operations.'"

"No," Greisha said. "You can't do that. You have to wait for my husband and the other team leaders to return."

She regretted the words the moment they were out of her mouth.

"Return?" Axel said. "I thought they were all at home, sick?"

"They are," Greisha said. "I meant, return to full recovery."

"I have to do no such thing," Axel said. "And as you refuse to do anything to aid me, I am forced to do this."

"Please," Greisha said, stepping onto the threshold. "Don't do this. If you keep digging, we're all doomed."

“Then you shouldn’t have spat on me or my authority,” Axel said. “Sturgess and the others have until noon to show up in their positions.”

He turned and marched toward the pit.

Greisha gritted her teeth. They were in trouble.

# 32.

AXEL THE FOREMAN blinked against the sun, ascertaining the time. So far as he could tell, it was midday, and then some. He hadn't hefted a pickaxe in years, as his form attested. He was thick around the middle, his arms thin and without definition. But you didn't need to be a smart person to know how to use an axe. He picked it up and began to hack at the rock. Someone had to do it.

The other miners stood watching anxiously. They hadn't worked without a single qualified team leader before. They were not sure they wanted to take the risk digging without someone with experience to guide them. They looked from their instruments to the giant Gravitas rock and back again. They were clearly having second thoughts.

Greisha stood with her arms folded, as did many of those who carried out activities unrelated to mining. They stared, watching. Many of them were married to the miners standing on the chunk of Gravitas, their disapproval having a clear impact.

Even Axel was having doubts. It was highly unorthodox to work without a team leader present, but then, they had left him with no choice. If they thought Axel could not lead the miners, then they were under a severe apprehension.

He raised his axe above his head, hesitated only a moment, his arms shaking, and then brought it down with all his weight. Sparks glinted off the stone and burnt his eyes. He forgot to turn his head to one side. Yes, it had indeed been a while since he had hefted an axe. He was reminded how little he cared for it.

He much preferred pushing a pen around a piece of paper than to have to use his muscles. He knew his job was of less significance than the rest of his peers, especially since his job was to ensure all records were in perfect order for when the Merchants came down to check their workload.

His chest would swell on that day. He would be so proud of himself. All those years of ridicule would finally have been worth it, where he had eschewed friendship in exchange for his own sense of self worth.

He brought the axe down again, and was rewarded by the sound of others striking at their own rocks behind him. He'd struck something.

It filled him with a heady excitement he'd only experienced when he was a child, when he wielded his very first axe under his father's tutelage. He felt the thrill all the miners felt. It was a gambler's temperament, not knowing what it was they were going to find beneath the earth, a treasure they could not claim for themselves. Only in the name of the Merchants, to whom everything they discovered belonged, including themselves.

And then he felt something travel up his arms, shivering, shaking. A deep growling in the earth, powerful. It struck him in the chest, knocking him off his feet. He was on his back. His skin was burning, red hot and in a rage.

There was a throbbing red pulse, like the nerve ending of an eye's vein, the Gravitas boulder's eye. It looked angry.

# 33.

GREISHA KNEW it was a mistake to let Alex lead the day’s mining activities. But they were only following protocol. And if it was one thing Alex excelled at, it was following protocols.

She could have had a couple of the larger miners hold Alex back, but in truth, he was such a skinny, flaccid kind of guy that she never believed he had the ability to do much harm.

But as she was about to discover, a powerful man wasn’t required to light the fuse of a stick of dynamite. It was an apt analogy as it turned out.

Right at that moment Alex was lighting the fuse of a natural nuclear bomb. And it had an effect far greater than merely this world.

It was responsible for the death of thousands of people on the surface too, in the form of simultaneous earthquakes and volcanoes. There had been little in the way of early predictions. Experts called it an anomaly. Unprecedented. If they had known Axel’s personality type, known the resentment he felt toward the other miners for the years of abuse, it would have been anything but an anomaly. It would have been inevitable.

# 34.

THE MINERS crowded around the window, looking down on the blood-splattered body of the richest man in the world.

“Can we go now?” Robin said. “We came all this way to speak to him, and now he’s just tossed himself off the building.”

“Now we take control,” Sturgess said. “And we do what the Merchants were too greedy and stupid to do: we stop digging.”

“But digging is our livelihood,” Robin said. “What would we do if we couldn’t dig?”

“We develop, learn, farm,” Sturgess said. “We educate ourselves. We take over from where the Merchants left off and begin again. Only this time we won’t fall for the greed that consumed them.”

He allowed himself a small smile.

“It’s a bright future,” he said. “Our future. We have control of it now. We are under nobody’s heel. Nothing can stop us. Save ourselves.”

*BOOM!*

An eruption. It tore through the silence like it was committing a sin. It first sent out a shockwave that began in the sky and then rushed around the opposite half of the world, before reaching Sturgess and the others. It was weak when it reached them, but still strong enough to blow out the windows.

Then the eruptions burst forth, pulsing, tearing up the sky in a circular pattern. For miles, it looked like, but it was hard to judge at this distance. Black clouds, roiling and boiling, rose toward Sturgess and the other miners in their tower. It was unlike anything Sturgess had ever seen.

Magma spilled across the sky in dozens of rivulets, feeling across the surface like the roots of a tree. The magma’s heat blew out the cloud, revealing the other side of the world. It had been destroyed, blown from existence.

Sturgess felt weak. His legs shook and gave out underneath him. He slumped to the floor. Everything he had ever known, everything he had ever loved, had just been swept from existence. His wife. His baby growing in her belly. Gone.

“We were too late,” Old Man Marley said. “Just like the Merchant said. We should have come sooner, when there was still time.”

The red rivers reached the distant horizon and then began to stretch toward them. Nowhere was safe.

“We have to get out of here,” Robin said.

“There’s nowhere to go,” Sturgess said. “It’s over. It’s all over.”

“How can you say that?” Robin said. “It can’t be too late. It can’t be. There must be something we can do. Surely?”

“We had one course of action open to us,” Sturgess said. “To take action and do something about our world, to help rebuild it, or do nothing. The world got ripped to pieces by our betters, and we let them do it. For that, we are equally guilty.”

“But there must be something we can do now!” Robin said. “Some way to stop it?”

But there wasn’t. Sturgess found he didn’t even have the energy to lie. It was over.

A herd of asteroids and flaming rocks fell toward the Merchant city and struck with the force of megatons. The world was being swept up with magma and fire, swirling in a miasma of molten lead. They were doomed, and what made it worse was it was caused by their own doing.

But there is a silver lining to be found in every situation for those with persistence. Often it only took a slight bend of the human mind to locate it. Sturgess found it now, with his brain leaking out of his ears and eyes.

At least this moment wouldn’t last long.

It would soon be over and he would be at peace.

# 35.

A RIPPLE tore across the land like a pack of cards in a giant's hands. Bryan and Zoe's legs shuddered, shaking, almost knocking them off their feet.

"What was that?" Bryan said.

"An earthquake if I'm not mistaken," Zoe said.

"That can't be good," Bryan said.

He had placed his hand on the wall of the world to brace himself against the earthquake's shudder and found it difficult to remove it. Something was hugging his hand, pulling it toward the wall. Gravity, he realized. His hand felt sticky, like he had glue attached to his palm. He looked at his hand and pressed it back against the wall.

"We need to figure out a way to get up to the kids," Zoe said. "Any ideas?"

"I've got one," Bryan said. "Check me out."

Zoe could tell from the change in location of Bryan's voice that something had transpired. She turned to find Bryan ten feet above where he ought to have been. He was standing with his feet on the wall, at a ninety degree angle.

"How in God's name did you get up there?" Zoe said.

"I just put my feet on the wall and it held my weight," Bryan said.

"Isn't the blood rushing to your head?" Zoe said.

"No," Bryan said. "It's like I'm standing on the ground. I suppose I *am* standing on the ground. It's all about perspective. I guess there must be something powerful on the other side of the wall, a chunk of Gravitas maybe."

"Great," Zoe said. "But how is this going to help us get the kids back?"

Looking up, Bryan could see Zoe's point. There was no way they were going to reach the kids by traversing the wall. They would be little closer to the nest going up the wall as they were from where they currently were.

"It's all about mass," Bryan said. "The things that attract the most amount of gravity are the larger things. Nothing much here is larger than the mountain, which means it ought to have a large amount of gravity. So,

if we can enter its field it ought to drag and pull us toward it—like the planet Earth does with the moon."

"I'm with you so far," Zoe said. "But what happens if we get too close to the mountain? It'll pull us toward it and we'll smash on the ground like we'd fallen from a great height."

Bryan stepped down from the wall.

"There is another possibility," he said.

"What?" Zoe said.

Bryan hopped on the spot.

"Don't you notice it?" he said. "The lack of gravity here? It's weaker here because the mountain is interfering with it. It's blocking it, taking most of the gravity for itself. I noticed it once we started getting closer to the mountain. I feel lighter, bouncier. You must sense it too."

Zoe hadn't, too concerned with locating the kids. But now Bryan mentioned it, she supposed she did feel a little lighter than usual. She'd supposed it was caused by the fact they were getting closer to the kids. She hopped on the spot.

"So what?" she said. "What difference does that make?"

"It means, if we can throw something up high enough, it might get caught by the mountain's gravity," Bryan said. "And once it gets caught it'll hit the mountain's peak."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Zoe said.

She ran to the edge of the forest and grabbed a vine that hung limply from a tree. She pulled it free, pulling it until it had snapped free of the forest. It was too long for just one of them to hold. They coiled it up and approached a small hillock. It was the closest they could get to the mountaintop from where they were.

Bryan pulled his sleeves up and took hold of the vine. He swung his arms around, gaining in momentum until he let go. The vine rose, slowing when it reached its apex. It fell back to Earth.

Bryan wound the vine up again and this time drew his arm back like a baseball pitcher. He threw his arm up. The vine rose, unfurling, higher than before. It reached its apex once again. Experience taught that the vine ought to fall back down immediately, but that didn't happen. The vine stayed up, like a snake that had been charmed. Bryan pushed the vine, but it didn't rise any farther, and instead fell from the sky.

"It almost worked!" Zoe said. "Try again!"

Bryan coiled the vine up like he was preparing a lasso. He wound his arm up and threw it, all in one smooth movement. The vine rose higher and higher into the air. Once again it reached its apex, slowing as it did so. The vine stayed up, locked into position like it was made of stone.

“I don’t believe it,” Zoe said.

“Believe it,” Bryan said. “Now all we have to do is get it closer to the mountain top. The kids will be able to climb up and join us here.”

“This is like a computer game or something,” Zoe said. “I’m sure I’ve seen something like this in Mario.”

Bryan shrugged.

“It’s our reality now,” he said. “We need to figure out a way to get the vine to drop down on the other side.”

“It needs to be heavier,” Zoe said. “Gravity will do the rest. Tie something to the end. Something heavy.”

“But not too heavy,” Bryan said. “We need to be able to throw it up high.”

Zoe found a stone and tied the vine around it.

“Wait,” Bryan said, looking up at the mountain peak. “Something’s happening. I think the kids’ situation is getting worse.”

# 36.

WAYWARD tentatively approached his parents and fellow brethren, who were removing the last of their shell casing. They made soft hooting noises to one another, speaking, investigating.

“He’s figuring out he doesn’t belong with us,” Cassie said. “His brothers and sisters look more like him than we do.”

“That’s nice,” Aaron said with a smile.

“You’re so naive,” Cassie said, shaking her head.

“Why are you so cynical all the time?” Aaron said.

“Don’t you see what’s going to happen?” Cassie said.

Aaron looked back at the heartwarming scene taking place before them. He couldn’t see anything wrong with it. So what if Wayward was reunited with his family? He would be happier, and though Aaron would miss him, he knew it was for the best.

Then the blood fell from his face.

“Oh,” he said.

“Finally the penny drops,” Cassie said.

“He wouldn’t turn on us,” Aaron said.

“Don’t you think?” Cassie said.

He would turn against them, Aaron thought. It was in his nature. It was what he was.

The Humungo parents lowered their heads and made gentle purring sounds. Wayward approached them and rubbed his beak against their feathers. They opened their mouths and regurgitated a meal for him. The parent birds looked up, got to their full height, and lowered their faces menacingly.

Aaron and Cassie backed away, waving their hands.

“Take it easy,” Cassie said. “We were just trying to stay alive. You would have done the same thing.”

“What are you talking to them for?” Aaron said. “They can’t understand you.”

“What else am I supposed to do?” Cassie said.

Aaron didn’t know. He couldn’t think of a thing. There was nowhere to hide, nowhere to run. The parents and their chicks were closing on them. Only half the nest remained open to them.

“I guess this is the end,” Cassie said.

“It was nice knowing you,” Aaron said.

“I wish I could say the same,” Cassie said.

Their calves met the back wall of the nest. They were cornered.

Cassie felt chill, cold to the bone. Above all, she felt sadness. Sadness she hadn’t been able to do the things she now knew she wanted to do. Sadness at having her life cut so short. Sadness at not being able to thank her father for everything he’d done for her. Sadness at not getting to see her mother one last time. She reached out and hugged Aaron. He hugged her back. He made no smartass comment. They were both terrified.

*Wark!*

Wayward rushed forward from his family, toward Aaron and Cassie. For a moment, Cassie thought he was intent on delivering the first blow in his revenge against them. But then she saw the soft soppy look in his eye, the one he always presented around feeding time.

“Wayward!” Aaron said.

He reached up and wrapped his arms around the soft feathers of the giant chick’s breast. After the extra day of living and eating, he was bigger than his brothers and sisters, but what they lacked in size they made up with numbers.

“He’s protecting us,” Aaron said with a broken smile.

Cassie shook her head.

“He might have the best intentions,” she said. “But there are too many of them. They’ll tear him to pieces.”

# 37.

“BRYAN!” ZOE said. “We have to help them!”

“How?” Bryan said. “We can’t get to them!”

Zoe surveyed their situation. They stood on a dimple in the sky, a short distance from the top of the mountain on the other side of the world. The kids were getting backed into a corner. She ran the situation over in her mind, shutting her eyes to give herself full concentration. She opened them. She had a plan.

“Take the stone off the vine,” Zoe said.

Bryan wanted to argue, but he recognized that look in her eye and obeyed. He unpicked the knot and let the rock drop. Zoe snatched a dead squirrel that hung from Bryan’s waist. Despite her warnings, he hadn’t been able to compel himself not to consume any roadkill he found along the way. Some people just couldn’t help themselves.

Bryan frowned at the meat, but didn’t give voice to his confusion. He tied a strong knot around the squirrel’s hind legs. Why this should be better than a rock, he had no idea. He swirled the squirrel above his head, faster and faster, until it was a blur, and then released it, tossing it up into the air. It flew, far higher and easier than the lasso had.

Rather than slow down, the squirrel actually began to speed up. Bryan felt a strong tug as the gravity on the other side of the world seized the flying mammal and began to pull it away from him. Bryan let the vine run through his soft hands, slipping away. He kept a close eye on the pile of vine at his feet to ensure he didn’t lose all of it.

“Is it long enough, do you think?” Zoe said.

“Yes,” Bryan said. “That’s not what concerns me.”

“What concerns you?” Zoe said.

“Look at the angle,” Bryan said. “I did my best, but I don’t think it’s going to hit the nest.”

Zoe looked up. Bryan was right. It wasn’t majorly off, but it was going to miss the mountaintop, and therefore the nest, by some meters.

“Give it to me,” Zoe said.

“We can’t throw it again,” Bryan said. “The kids need our help now.”

“I’m not going to throw it again,” Zoe said.

She took the vine and walked, building to a run. She didn’t want to slow the squirrel down, but she needed to change its trajectory to correct its current course. She was effectively running with a meat kite.

The squirrel began to turn. Zoe tightened her grip around the green vine, watching as the squirrel swung toward the nest. She could feel the weight of the squirrel pull. Her plan was for the meat to be a distraction, to get the attention of the parent birds, for the kids to use that distraction and grab the vine. Bryan and Zoe would then tug on them, pulling them to their side of the world. She ached to feel Aaron in her arms again.

Zoe leapt and landed on the wall, stumbling a moment at the shift in gravity. She continued to run, picking up speed. She stopped, checking the squirrel’s trajectory. It was heading the right way! Yes!

And then her smile froze.

Something completely bizarre happened.

Aaron and Cassie committed suicide.

# 38.

THE PARENT birds hissed at Wayward through their nostrils. Wayward stepped back and lowered his head, making soft mewing noises. He was arguing for their lives, Cassie realized. The parent birds took another step forward. This time Wayward hissed. It was not a friendly hiss, or a hiss of gentle chastisement, but a hiss of genuine and very real anger.

*Wark!* the parent birds said, aiming their command at their newly hatched children.

The chicks stepped forward and, acting like sheepdogs, attempted to part Wayward from Aaron and Cassie. Given the choice, Cassie and Aaron would much rather try her chances against the chicks than the parents, and so they kept close to Wayward at all times, brandishing sticks when one of the chicks came too close to Wayward's flanks. The parent birds rallied from the sidelines.

"We can't keep doing this," Cassie said. "Eventually they're going to break through."

"Then what do we do?" Aaron said.

Cassie's eyes moved to the side.

"The only thing we can do," she said. "It's time to fly the coop."

"Fly the…?" Aaron said.

His frown melted with slack jawed disbelief as he pieced Cassie's plan together.

"Wayward can't fly yet!" he said.

"No," Cassie said. "But he can float."

Cassie picked up their harnesses from their previous attempted scale down the mountain.

"Put this on," she said.

Their backs were against the back nest wall. It would only take a little push to get Wayward over the side. The chicks made an arch around the hapless Wayward.

"Strap yourself to his other leg!" Cassie said.

She looked down over the side of the nest at the swirling mist below. They had no idea how high this mountain was, what lay below them. They

were mad. They were crazy. They were desperate.

“I swear, if you’re wrong about this…” Aaron said.

“What?” Cassie said. “You’re going to kill me? That is going to happen to us anyway. Now, push Wayward over the side.”

Cassie and Aaron braced themselves against Wayward’s legs and pushed. Wayward began to teeter on the edge. He stiffened and applied pressure back, keeping himself inside the nest.

“Harder!” Cassie said. “Come on! More!”

They forced themselves forward, against Wayward, who made the most pained *Wark* sound Cassie had ever heard him utter. But he was too big and heavy. They were never going to get him over the side.

“Wayward,” Aaron said, placing his hand on the bird’s cheek as if it were a person. He looked into its eyes. “You have to trust me. We can do this. We can.”

Wayward looked from Aaron, over the nest’s edge, and back again. Clearly these birds had been born with a high degree of intelligence. Wayward relaxed and flapped his wings, limbering up.

“He’s ready,” Aaron said.

They gently prodded Wayward forward. He took the required step and fell over the side. Cassie heard a shocked *Honk!* from the parent birds as they went over. The wind rushed against her ears and she heard no more, saw no more, through the thick mist.

# 39.

WATCHING THE scene from Bryan and Zoe's vantage point made the whole event seem like they were watching it on a movie screen. It didn't seem real. One minute Aaron and Cassie were in the nest, the next they hopped out of it and disappeared into the mist.

"No!" Zoe said quietly, and then louder: "Aaron! No!"

But she was too late. Their kids were gone.

Zoe was empty, a hollow shell. She fell to her knees and couldn't believe what she'd just witnessed. She must have been mistaken. What she saw couldn't have happened. It mustn't.

"It's not over," Bryan said. "They wouldn't have done it if they didn't have a good reason."

"They were cornered by the Humungos," Zoe said. "That's reason enough to jump."

"No," Bryan said. "They looked like they were keeping the giant chick pretty close to me."

"So?" Zoe said.

"So, maybe they're using the chick to float down the mountain," Bryan said.

"Float?" Zoe said.

The situation was getting stranger and stranger, but it made sense in a warped kind of way.

"Yes," Zoe said. "That must be it. They wouldn't just give up like that."

Now she thought about it, she realized Aaron and Cassie hadn't jumped by themselves, but with a giant ball of yellow fluff. It must have been the only chance they saw of escape.

Then she saw one of the Humungo birds leap from the nest, tucking its wings under itself into a dive, head first into the mist.

*The parent bird is hunting them…*

The chicks tweeted, jumping on the spot, wanting to follow their parent over the side, but the other Humungo blocked them, spreading her wings to discourage them. The chicks backed away. They soon found something else to keep them entertained.

The dead squirrel.

It dangled in front of their nostrils. Zoe pulled the lump of meat away. The chicks jumped for it and almost reached it. Zoe could barely keep it away from them. They were not her intended catch. She pulled on the line and drew it up to head height—perfect snapping distance for the parents.

This was her chance, Zoe knew. This was their only chance.

*Come on*, Zoe thought. *Take it. Come on. Be greedy you dumb animal*.

The remaining Humungo snapped at the squirrel, missed, snapped again, and swallowed it whole. The vine protruded from its beak. The bird pulled back and snapped at the vine, but its beak was not sharp enough to sever it.

Zoe tugged hard on the line. She felt a sudden jerk. The bird squawked and leapt back, pulling the vine with it. It thought it was choking. Perhaps it was. Zoe pulled harder on the vine, but not so hard that it might dislodge the meat.

The bird flapped its wings, leaping back and taking flight. Zoe followed it, running up the slight rise of the dimpled land.

“Bryan!” Zoe said. “Give me a lift up! Quick!”

Bryan cupped his hands and crouched down. Zoe came running at him. With all the strength in his body, Bryan felt Zoe’s weight in his hands. He lifted at the same time Zoe threw herself up into the air. It wasn’t nearly close enough for her to pass into the next world’s gravity field, but it was enough to give her a head start.

The Humungo parent bird took flight, and brought Zoe up with it, taking her away into its own world. As Zoe rose, she felt the force of gravity weaken, and then shift, pulling against her in the opposite direction.

The giant bird pulled down, going into a dive. It was exactly what Zoe needed. She felt her stomach lurch as she passed through the switched gravity field of the world above her. The world their kids belonged to. She was closer already.

“Yes!” Zoe said.

The smile fell from her lips as she realized the full consequences of her success. She was high above the ground, above the mountain, and falling. Falling fast. The heat of the sky gave way to the icy cold of the mountaintop.

Gravity’s twin pulled her toward the large landmass below. It was big, powerful. She fell past the bird. She tightened her grip on the vine,

preparing for the jolt. It came. She was ready. She prayed the vine wouldn’t snap or come loose. It didn’t.

The Humungo dropped a dozen feet in the air under Zoe’s weight. She swung through the air, holding on for dear life. She began to swing back. She was terrified.

On the second swing forward she began to pull herself up the vine, hand over hand, toward the Humungo she was attached to. Looking ahead, she could see it had almost chewed through the vine. But it was still holding on by a few stalwart strands.

The bird caught sight of Zoe out the corner of its eye and squawked, no doubt unused to being the hunted. It turned, entering a spin, to dislodge Zoe. But she wouldn’t let go, and climbed the final few yards to the bird’s broad back.

She sat there a moment, exhausted beyond words, letting the bird’s head provide some protection against the strong buffeting wind. She regained her breath, her lungs burning.

Semi-restored, she pulled on the vine to wrap it around the bird’s neck to make a stronger leash. She was surprised to find the vine possessed a weight she did not expect.

She looked back to see a lump on the other end. Bryan, clutching the line between his hands and legs, waved. He hastily gripped the vine again with both hands.

“You bloody fool!” Zoe said. “You’re going to get yourself killed!”

She waited until the bird doubled back on itself before she could wrap the vine around the bird’s neck two more times. If Bryan insisted on coming along on the journey, she might as well use him.

Zoe pulled on the vine and took the bird into a dive, toward the large bulbous shadow of the large chick as it spun end over end.

# 40.

WAYWARD FLAPPED his wings, rolling end over end. His wings were far too small to support himself, but with Aaron and Cassie's extra weight, he quickly identified south. He worked his wings as hard as he could muster. Though they were still falling, it was at a slower pace than before.

Aaron and Cassie sat on either of the giant chick's legs as they floated down, down, down. After they passed through the mist the view was clear and beautiful. But something was happening in this adopted world of theirs. Red rivers streamed over the surface in the distance, racing toward them at an incredible rate.

"This isn't so bad," Cassie said. "So long as our little engine doesn't give out."

"He looks okay to me," Aaron said.

"For now," Cassie said.

She frowned.

"Did you hear anything when we were on the mountaintop?" she said.

"No," Aaron said. "Why?"

"I thought I heard a voice," Cassie said.

"Whose voice?" Aaron said.

"Father's, I thought," Cassie said. "Before we jumped."

Aaron thought about for this for a moment.

"Maybe it was the wind," he said.

"Maybe," Cassie said.

*Screeeee!*

Cassie looked up. A parent bird flew directly for them, beak facing forward, wings tucked in close behind. A jet plane couldn't have fallen any faster. It flew past them and pulled up, slowly extending its wings. It circled around and came at them.

"She's coming back," Cassie said.

"What's she going to do?" Aaron said

"Try to knock us off its chick," Cassie said. "It's what I'd do."

"Nice to see you're in tune," Aaron said.

The parent bird swooped in and flapped its wings, drawing up alongside the flailing chick, which *cheep*ed in earnest. The Humungo snapped at Aaron and Cassie in turn, attempting to pull them loose, but they latched on tight to Wayward and kicked at the parent with their feet.

The parent bird shook her head and positioned herself under her chick, which settled down and took position on its broad back. The parent bird flapped her wings and began to draw them up into the sky again—back to the nest. But they couldn't go back there.

"Push Wayward off!" Cassie said.

She and Aaron pulled at Wayward with all their strength, and managed to get him off his mother's back. He resumed his frantic flapping once again. The parent bird hissed through her nostrils in anger.

"Steer Wayward toward the mountain!" Cassie said.

The sooner they got to the mountain, the sooner they would have their feet on solid ground again. Cassie tried not to think about the other creatures that might be waiting for them, watching them from the shadowy crevices on the mountainside, getting into position to consume them. It was their only hope of survival.

Cassie held onto Wayward's leg and pulled herself up. She forced her weight down. The chick *cheep*ed and tried to straighten himself up again to continue his descent. Why did it have to be such a stupid creature? Cassie thought. They were trying to help it.

She tugged on its feathers to force it in the right direction, but it was having none of it. They needed to get to the mountainside before the parent bird could swat them from the sky.

The Humungo flew by in a desperate flyby. Her claw found Cassie's arm and scratched her. She lost her grip and fell, but one arm found a handful of bright feathers. She dangled by one arm.

The parent bird swooped up in a wide arc, preparing to come in again.

Aaron reached down for Cassie.

"Take my hand!" he said.

Cassie stretched, but it was out of reach.

The parent bird made her familiar hunting *Screeeee!* noise again, drilling down through the air to smash into Cassie's flailing figure. Cassie looked down. She was still an intimidating distance from the ground. This was going to hurt.

A single body length out, the Humungo raised her claws to snatch at Cassie, when something swung into the parent bird, causing her to squawk a muffled wheeze as she was knocked off course.

Cassie concentrated on getting back into position on Wayward's extended foot before looking at who, or what, had rescued her.

"Swing toward the mountain!" Bryan said.

Bryan was swinging from a vine, like an out of shape Tarzan, suspended from the second parent bird, which was being flown by Zoe!

"Please tell me I'm not hallucinating," Cassie said out loud.

"If you are, I am too!" Aaron said.

He waved at their parents before focusing on the task in hand: getting Wayward to the ground safely.

# 41.

“WE’VE ONLY got one shot at this,” Bryan bellowed.

With the wind rushing past both their ears it was difficult to make out each other’s voices. The little chick the kids were clutching onto was heading farther away from them, falling like a rock.

“Hold onto your hat,” Zoe said.

With Bryan hanging from the vine, he would make an ideal wrecking ball. Their only other option was to coerce the bird she rode into attacking its partner. She didn’t believe she could do that.

Zoe steered the bird, flying directly down. It was the fastest route to where they wanted to go. Bryan felt the soft tug of the vine as they descended, snapping around and dragging him down. He knew the importance of speed, but did Zoe need to be so reckless? If they didn’t hurry, they weren’t going to be able to rescue their kids in time, so he supposed they had little choice.

The bird fought against Zoe’s control, but she maintained a tight grip and tugged on the vine, choking the creature. It hacked, before following her lead. Zoe felt her bum lifting up off the bird. She gripped the bird’s feathers tight and gritted her teeth as the air beat against her. She turned her face to the side to see the vine snaking out behind her.

She felt the snap of the vine on the bird at Bryan’s weight. The bird squawked. It hadn’t been expecting the tug. Zoe’s focus was always on the falling yellow blob on the fringes of her vision. She hoped Bryan was ready. It was his moment of truth.

# 42.

BRYAN HAD lost his lunch three times already, which was odd, if for no other reason than he didn't recall ever having lunch that day. The third time he'd spewed he'd been unable to turn his head in time. Zoe had decided to perform an impromptu suicide death roll, and so his vomit had splattered all over himself.

There was no time to worry about that now. He gripped the vine tight, though it was already wrapped circulation impedingly tight around his waist. He was going to have some trouble letting the vine go when it came time, when he would need to grab the kids. He would deal with that bridge when he came to it.

If he even came to it.

The fluffy yellow blob was rushing up in his vision. He had to squint to see through the icy air. It was difficult to think under such circumstances. He wrapped the vine around his right leg, hoping it would hold. He let go of the vine with one hand, a test maneuver. He felt himself lifting away from the vine. The coils around his leg didn't come loose. Perfect. Now he just had to be crazy enough to attempt his gambit.

The chick was rising fast—or rather, he was falling fast—and Bryan let go of his vine and stretched out his arms. The vine held fast. He could reach out with both hands. He was ready.

"Okay!" Bryan shouted.

The bird dipped immediately. Zoe was making her maneuver. It's amazing how two people can be linked, the way he and Zoe were. They hadn't discussed what it was they each wanted to do, and yet they both knew what needed to be done, their part in it, and how they would have to carry it out.

Bryan felt the familiar movement of his stomach as it lurched out behind him, and his lunch—the one he couldn't even recall consuming in the first place—began to rise in his throat. He could taste it, and it make him feel even more sick.

He'd found himself joining the circus. He hadn't had any training, and yet he was expected to carry out the greatest trick in the roadshow's

repertoire. He was game. If he wasn't, who would take his place? *Please put your hands up*, Bryan thought with a chuckle. He shook his head. He'd lost his marbles.

Bryan moved his arms and legs to either side to steady himself as best he could, a skydiver in freefall. The yellow blob was a fuzzy mass. As he neared it, the mass rolled over. It was his first up-close view of it. It was a giant chick, and clinging to one of its legs was Cassie.

The chick was working overtime in flapping its wings, trying to stay airborne. But Bryan could see it was a losing endeavor. The chick's wings were small and the fall it still had to make was far.

The other Humungo parent was swinging toward the chick, its claws fully extended. Bryan swung on his vine, and was tempted to beat on his chest and bellow the famous Tarzan call, but refrained, and focused on the task in hand. He struck the bird, curling up into a ball with his elbows and knees protruding.

Cassie had her eyes shut tight and clutched the chick's leg in her arms. Bryan was relieved. The bird continued to turn, rolling over in the air, its eyes closed and unconscious. Bryan was alarmed to find its right leg did not hold Aaron, as he'd expected.

Aaron was missing.

# 43.

THE OTHER Humungo bird above her screeched. Zoe knew it would be coming for her first. She didn't allow her bird to slow, and instead pulled up on the reins, forcing the bird up, straightening it out. The bird above her cried as it overshot, its sharp claws grasping and missing her head by inches.

Its wing feathers fluttered, signaling it hitting the brakes. It stretched its claws out again to take another swipe at Zoe. There wasn't enough time to change direction. She fell to one side, bringing her bird around. The claws whistled past her ear, and her bird swung in a tumble roll, turning upside down.

Zoe felt herself losing her grip under the powerful centrifugal forces, but forced herself to hold on tight with her knees and straightened the bird up. She dreaded to think how Bryan was doing at the end of the vine. She was relieved when she felt another tug as Bryan swung through the air behind her.

Bryan's weight and movement in the swing was smooth. The ground below them was rising up fast, green but choked with red that filtered through the country like veins under an old man's sickly skin. Zoe felt dizzy, her head growing weak with lack of oxygen.

"...oe!" a voice shouted.

And then a few seconds later:

"Zo…!" the voice said again.

A few more seconds passed, and then again, but quieter this time:

"Zoe!" the voice said.

It acted like a marauding war siren. Zoe snapped upright. She blinked, the line in the distance resolving into the horizon. The wind brushed against her. She felt more alive than she had in years.

She checked over her shoulder. The second Humungo was reaching toward her again with its wicked talons, beak opening in anticipation of the approaching meal. Its eyes were wide, to take in every ounce of information it could.

Zoe didn’t think. She relaxed, letting her body react. She felt the feathers in her hands and twisted them, sharp. To the right. A few came loose in her hands. The bird beneath her screeched. It twisted, peeling right. The talons of the other bird grazed Zoe’s arm as her bird barrel rolled.

# 44.

AARON BLINKED awake and knew immediately something was wrong. But then, you didn't need to be a genius to recognize the futility of a situation when you were in freefall, spinning end over end, unable to get your bearings.

Then it all came back to him.

He'd been clutching the leg of a Humungo chick, holding on for his very life. Then he'd simply let go. It hadn't been a decision on his part. Darkness had swept around him in a flowing cloak and he'd simply fallen. Fallen unconscious.

Cassie had still been clutching Wayward's other leg. And there had been someone else… *Bryan!* Aaron thought. But how was that possible?

His heart leapt. They weren't doomed. Yet. Though with nothing to cling to and the ground rushing up to meet him, Aaron supposed it wasn't but a matter of time before he was doomed.

Their parents had come to rescue them. And they would, if it was at all possible. He needed to buy them time. He thrust his arms and legs out, and though he spun end over end, he always turned his limbs into the air, causing as much resistance as possible. It was all he could do. He had to hope they reached him before the rocks below did.

# 45.

ZOE MANEUVERED her bird underneath the falling chick. Bryan was already with Cassie. He helped pry her fingers off the chick's leg and dropped her onto the back of the parent bird behind Zoe. Cassie wrapped her arms tight around Zoe's waist.

"Where's Aaron?" Zoe said.

"Down," Bryan said. "Hurry up. We don't have a moment to lose."

Zoe was already peeling away from the exhausted chick as she turned the bird into a steep fall.

"Hold on, Cassie," Zoe said.

Cassie held on even tighter, shutting her eyes and burying her face in Zoe's back. The bird and Bryan were falling at the same speed beside one another as they descended toward the small flailing figure rapidly approaching the unforgiving bubbling red lava flows below.

Aaron grew large fast. Bryan was the first to reach him, and slowed his descent as he hurtled into him. He gripped hold of his jacket, and then drew him in closer, until he could wrap his arms and legs around him. They both held out their arms, and the air resistance helped slow them.

Zoe was already peeling away, pulling up gently, to take Bryan and Aaron's weight. The vine caught, and they swung in a wide arc. They were swinging too low and were going to strike the ground. Zoe pulled her bird up, but not fast enough.

"Pull up!" Bryan said. "Pull up!"

He wrapped his arms tighter around Aaron and rolled in the air, so his back was to the approaching treetops. Bryan grunted as they slammed into them. Zoe pulled the bird up, and they floated over to a clearing. Aaron helped remove the vines from Bryan's leg. They shuffled aside as Zoe brought the bird in to land.

Zoe and Cassie climbed down from the Humungo's back. The bird turned to snap at them immediately, but Zoe kept hold of the vine and tugged hard on it. The bird choked, jumping back. The Humungo stepped back, hissing at Zoe.

"Are you going to behave yourself?" Zoe said.

The bird gave no hint it understood.

*Wark wark!*

A thick ball of yellow fluff fell end over end toward them, bleeping as it descended.

“Wayward!” Aaron said. “We have to save him!”

“Wayward?” Bryan said.

The parent bird looked up at the falling chick, desperation painted on its features. It jumped, going wild, biting at its restraints. It wanted to rescue its baby. Zoe could understand that.

“Hey!” Zoe said. “Hey!”

The bird snapped to attention, looking at Zoe. It nodded to the vines that held it. Zoe stepped forward and began unwinding them, releasing it. Once it was free, the bird stepped back and leapt into the air, flapping its powerful wings toward the falling chick. The second parent bird joined the first, and together they brought the chick down to the ground safely.

Aaron stepped toward Wayward, but his parents held him back.

“They’re dangerous,” Bryan said. “Let them go.”

“But Wayward did so much for us,” Aaron said.

“He knows that,” Bryan said. “He’ll always remember it. Hopefully he, at least, won’t be so bloodthirsty as his parents.”

The birds took off, Wayward perched on the back of one of his parents. The family hugged one another, holding one another tight. It was everything they’d been working toward. This moment.

“Can I smell puke?” Cassie said.

“I, uh, had a little accident,” Bryan said.

*BOOM!*

An explosion shook the earth by the throat. There was a flash and the world turned bright red, then bleached orange and yellow. The world was coming to an end and it wasn’t about to wait for anyone or anything. It was going to happen. Now.

“And onto the next thrilling chapter,” Zoe said.

# 46.

“NOW WHAT do we do?” Cassie said.

“There’s nothing we can do to stop it,” Bryan said. “We just have to find a way of escaping somehow.”

“That’s great,” Zoe said. “Except we don’t know where the Passage is.”

“We do, but unless we want a severe suntan I don’t think we want to use it,” Bryan said.

“So after all that falling through the sky stuff, we’re doomed anyway?” Cassie said. “We’d have been better off hitting the rocks at sixty miles an hour. At least it would have been quick.”

“What are you talking about?” Aaron said. “We know where the Passage is.”

“Where?” Zoe said.

Aaron pointed up, at the sky.

“The ceiling?” Bryan said. “You mean, where we just came from?”

“Yes,” Aaron said.

“How do you know this?” Zoe said.

“We found a map of the world,” Cassie said.

“And each major point links up,” Aaron said. “On your side, now the sky, there was a strange picture of something that looked like a spiral.”

“A spiral?” Zoe said. “Not another whirlpool.”

“No, I don’t think it’s a whirlpool,” Aaron said.

“Then what was it?” Zoe said.

“I’m not sure,” Aaron said. “Something that sucks or pulls, I guess. Why else would it be a spiral?”

“Which direction was it in?” Bryan said.

Aaron pointed to their east. Bryan shut his eyes and pictured the route they’d taken to get to the mountain. He shook his head.

“No,” he said “We didn’t see anything matching a spiral… Wait.”

“What?” Zoe said. “What is it?”

“The spiral,” Bryan said. “We did see something it could have been.”

“What?” Zoe said.

“The quicksand pit,” Bryan said.

“Right!” Zoe said.

“That’s it,” Aaron said. “It must be it.”

“We don’t know that,” Zoe said.

*HISSSSSS!*

The sound came from beneath their feet. The earth erupted, sending a large magnetic rock into the air, much like the Gravitas boulder Bryan and Zoe saw in the mine. The family took cover, and watched as it rose up, up, up…

The family remained behind cover, expecting the rock to crash back to earth…

Only it never did, and instead stayed up there, hovering in midair, spinning like a top.

“The quicksand pit it is, then,” Zoe said.

“I second that motion,” Aaron said.

“We’re going to have to hurry,” Bryan said. “This world doesn’t look like it’s got much more life left in it.”

“Uh, guys?” Cassie said.

She was floating, her feet rising off the ground by a foot. The whole family began to rise, floating.

“We’ll need to be able to walk if we want to go anywhere,” Bryan said.

Zoe bent down, picked up some rocks, and stuffed them in her pockets. The others followed suit, and soon they were all walking across the ground, dragging their feet, fully loaded with dirt.

“I know it’s good to keep yourself grounded, but this is ridiculous,” Cassie said.

# 47.

A DOZEN large Gravitas boulders floated in the middle of the world, spinning gently in place. There was a loud *crack!* and the walls of the world disintegrated, breaking apart like crumble. It fell forward, an avalanche of earth, but never hit the floor. Instead, gravity seized and pulled it so it swirled around the world, a miasma of carnage.

Chunks of rock larger than their heads zipped past their ears in an attempt to replace their skulls. The family ducked down and crawled on their bellies. A crack in the earth broke, and red raw magma shone like the gates of hell.

“It should be here!” Bryan said with squinting eyes. “It should be here, somewhere!”

“Maybe it was never here,” Zoe said.

“It was!” Aaron said. “It should be! Right here!”

“Maybe it got blown away, like the rest of the world,” Cassie said.

Bryan took a step forward and stumbled. His leg was buried up to his ankle.

“It’s here!” Bryan said. “It’s here somewhere! Everyone spread out!”

Bryan felt with his free foot left and right, searching for where the quicksand was. His left foot was trapped, but only weakly, like it was on the edge of the pit.

“Here!” Zoe said. “It’s over here!”

She had sunk into the quicksand up to her knees. The others gathered around and sank beside her. They swirled around in a circle, heading into the center.

“Remember what happened last time?” Zoe said.

“Now we’ve got rocks in our pockets,” Bryan said.

“Not rockets?” Zoe said with a wink.

“Now is not the time,” Bryan said.

“Now is never the time,” Zoe said.

With the added weight, the quicksand overwhelmed them, submerging them beneath its surface.

“Here we go again,” Cassie said.

This time, they didn’t rise back up. They each felt the familiar tug of a sinkhole as they were sucked beneath the earth.

# Rosetta #4

ROSETTA LET out a desperate breath as she was expelled from the Passage. She flew through the air and held up her arms to protect herself against the fall. But it never came. She felt frozen, like she was being held up by someone. She didn't want to open her eyes. But she did.

She was floating, six inches off the ground. She cast around, confused, mesmerized. She kicked her feet, reached out with her hands, but felt nothing. She made swimming motions and moved forward, slowly, but what really made her move was the transfer of body weight.

Rosetta pulled herself onto a large floating rock. She braced herself, bending her knees. She located her next pebble, another rock ten yards distant. She pushed off her rock, forcing it backward. She drifted forward to her next stepping stone.

She paused on the rock, peering around at the molten lead and floating rivers of lava.

*Why do I always have to clean up Bryan's messes?* Rosetta thought.

One thing was certain: she was due a hefty pay rise when she eventually got her hands on him. She coiled her legs and leapt to the next boulder.

# Once Upon A Time

# 1.

IT WAS a fine job, and no mistake. Montgomery reached into the water and felt at the cold skin of the deceased—and probably *diseased*—body. A shiver went through him. He would never get used to that—the cold, claminess of dead flesh, swollen and puffy with water.

He suspected it was because one day it would be *his* skin that felt this way. It wouldn't be long before it did, he thought to himself. He was an old man. Death was the only thing left to look forward to. But Montgomery had been saying that for the past twenty years.

He expected every moment to be his last. The only tragedy—in his eyes—was that it never came, and so he spent his life in perpetual fear, waiting for the moment when something—or someone—would snatch his life from him.

Montgomery wore a mask over his mouth to prevent breathing in any fumes or disease that might emanate from the body. It wasn't right for someone living to have to go touching the bodies of those that were dead. Who knew what they had wrong with them. They weren't from this world. They were from the underworld, and that thought terrified Montgomery more than any other.

One half of the bodies was always puffy white with death. The other half—from the top of the head to the waist, was always scorched black and red raw, bubbled and harsh, their clothes burnt rags. The body had been ejected from the bowels of hell. There were two of them.

Montgomery pulled them out of the water into his boat. He piled the bodies one on top of the other. It was the only way he could fit them in his tiny boat. It lacked the respect the dead deserved to be treated with, but there was no avoiding that.

Montgomery picked up his oars and set them in the stirrups on either side of his boat. He placed the paddles into the water and bent forward, the paddles reaching back to begin pulling away.

A single bubble formed on the lake's surface. Montgomery peered over the side at it. The bubble popped. Montgomery leaned back on his bench and again pulled the oars through the water.

*Pop! Pop!*

More bubbles.

Montgomery felt a churning sensation in his stomach. He knew what was about to happen. He wished he'd worked faster so he could have been away from here by now. Then they would have been someone else's problem.

Bubbles erupted on the surface, rushing and frothing at the mouth. The lake was going rabid, and it always resulted in the same thing. More arrivals.

But this was unusual, happening with greater fervor. Hell *really* wanted to be rid of these corpses, Montgomery thought.

He fell back into the belly of his boat, eyes wide. The bubbling water grew more violent as the lake burped, retched, and reached across the surface toward him.

There was a bright red gleaming light from the floor of the lake. Montgomery seized the oars and bent his knees, preparing to row. He was going to leave. He'd just say the bodies must have come after he left with the two he'd found. In his fear he lost his grip, sending an oar floating to one side.

Montgomery reached over, stretching his fingertips for the lost oar. He could just about feel it with the tips of his fingers, and began reeling it in.

Montgomery was face to face with the surface of the lake now. His eyes boggled. The harsh red light illuminated a body, a calm face, that rose higher and higher toward the surface.

Montgomery pulled back, but his weight was off, and he fell into the lake. His boat rocked, but stayed upright. The water was ice cold.

Montgomery began kicking back toward the surface. He was arrested in his actions by the sight of not one, but three—no, *four!*—bodies rising toward the lake's surface. They looked like souls ascending to heaven. Perhaps that was what this world was compared to the hell they had formerly occupied.

Just as Montgomery breached, so too did the other bodies. Montgomery gasped for air, and floundered with his hands for the boat. One of the bodies nudged him with the top of their head. Montgomery ignored it and pulled himself up into the rowboat. He was panting, out of breath. He was too old for this.

He covered his face with his hands, unable to bring himself to look over the side, quivering. The lake was calm once again, the crickets and toads continuing their tuneless vigil.

Montgomery peered over the side. The final few bubbles popped into oblivion, leaving nothing but the faintest trace of half a dozen sets of vague ripples emanating out from the lake's center.

Eventually, Montgomery stopped shaking. He peered through his fingers, still clasped tight to his face, at the lake's surface. Where there had been no more bodies, there were now four. They floated on their backs, vacant expressions admiring the sky. Their eyes were closed and still wore clothes.

Montgomery blinked. He had never seen bodies like this before. They looked almost normal.

These bodies were not scorched. Somehow they had managed to avoid the worst of the flames of hell, and emerged up here, on God's green Earth, untouched. Montgomery crossed himself.

These things must truly be work of the devil, for them to come out of hell's own fiery void without a blemish. They must have been sent here by the great evil doer, Satan, sent here to test them, to destroy them, to slip amongst their number and do evil. Montgomery shivered.

He leaned over the side and picked up the missing oar, arms struggling under the weight. He prodded one of the floating figures—the man. There was no response, save for the body inching away from himself.

Montgomery cursed himself and put the oars back in the water. He turned around. Dead was dead. Even from hell. Montgomery usually liked the hollow thudding sounds of the boat as he rowed, but not tonight. Tonight they sounded ominous.

Montgomery didn't really want to touch these bodies, didn't need the extra work. But it would have been too obvious to whoever took the next shift that he had intentionally left the bodies here. And what a storm that would cause.

He sighed, grimaced, and reached over the side. He hooked his hands under the man's arms and pulled him into the boat. If he was alive, surely that would have woken him up. But the man didn't stir a muscle.

Montgomery did the same with the other bodies, and laid them atop the first two crisp bodies he'd found. This had to be a record haul. He ensured to tie each of their wrists and ankles together with rope, and laid them

down. It was believed bodies from hell might awaken and take their vengeance upon the living. It had never happened, but evidence never killed superstitious beliefs.

Montgomery wiped the sweat from his brow. It was not caused by exertion—the air was damp. He cast around and listened. Was it just him, or did the world seem even more silent than usual? He got the depressing thought nature was watching him, paying attention to his every move.

Montgomery decided to get the job done, and as fast as he could. He pulled on the oars with a strength and speed and desperation he hadn’t felt in a long time. He hadn’t even had to do the worst part yet. That was still to come.

# 2.

THE BOAT coarsed over the lake in strong pulsing movements, stroke by stroke. Montgomery fancied no one else in town could have pulled the rowboat any faster than he currently was. His form was perfect. Funny how the body's performance kicked in when its survival was at stake.

Montgomery steered the boat through a large gaping rent in the side of the mountain. It was triangular in shape and looked like something had cleaved a hole right in the earth.

Montgomery hated it. He hated the look of it, hated the way it made him feel. Afraid. Mortally afraid. Despite having done this job a hundred times before, his feelings toward that cave never wavered.

Montgomery had never seen unscorched bodies emerge from the lake before. This was a first. Firsts were never a good omen. Firsts were a sign of something new taking place. A reversal in the world order. New meant danger. New meant intrigue. New meant death. But in Montgomery's mind, everything led to death. He was just that way inclined.

He held his lantern over the side and cast the light around. It did little to break through the darkness, the small orb of light illuminating nothing beyond the water's edge.

Montgomery hopped from the boat and into the shallow water. He thought he heard something and brought the lantern around. He didn't see anything. He wouldn't with this piddling light. He made munching motions with his mouth, noises like he was chewing cud. A sure sign he was nervous.

He gripped the prow of the boat with his swollen knuckles and pulled it onto shore. Then he reached into the bottom and pulled out the bodies. The unscorched bodies seemed heavier now, and if he didn't miss his guess, he would have said they were getting warmer too. He decided to ignore it and get on with his job.

Montgomery laid the bodies along the shore, just shy of the water's edge. He glanced at the bodies and considered just leaving them there, but he knew he couldn't. Someone would come across them and he'd get

blamed for it. He sighed and bent down. He'd begin with the scorched bodies first. They were what he was used to.

He hooked one hand under each scorched body's armpit and dragged them across the ground, deeper into the cave. They didn't put up much resistance, though one of them got snagged on an outcrop of rock and seemed unwilling to be pulled off it.

The tunnels were like a maze in these caves. It was easy to get turned around and confused. You could spend weeks wandering around without knowing where you were going. That's if you could survive there that long. There was little in the way of food or sustenance.

Everyone in town knew someone who had gone wandering in the caves, never to emerge again. They believed they became spirits that haunted this place. Some said you could hear their cries if you listened closely enough. Montgomery had no such intention of listening, and blocked his ears of any sound.

He came to a clearing within a large cavern, a few boulders acting as decoration. Montgomery lay the bodies down in the center. The hairs stood up on the back of his neck. He did not make the mistake of attempting to identify his audience in the darkness. If something was there he wouldn't have been able to stop it in any case. He was better off not knowing. If it did attack, hopefully it would finish him off quickly.

Still, he was scared. He wouldn't breathe a sigh of relief until he was back in the pub and staring at the stain of the wall that morphed into nothing but friendly shapes.

Montgomery wound through the tunnels back to the lake, and the bodies he still had to transport. When he came within sight of the unscorched bodies, he got quite a shock.

One of the bodies—the elder female—lay on its side, a few feet from where he had positioned it. Had something come and pulled at the body? Possibly. But if it had, there were no longer any tracks in the soft wet sand.

Montgomery's throat felt dry. He steeled his nerve and did what any sane man would do in such a situation. He ignored it. He had a job to do. Scratching his head about a moved body wasn't going to get the job done. But he wouldn't touch the female body, not until he had no choice.

He took the elder unscorched man by the wrists and dragged him backward, his boots making lines in the dirt. Montgomery kept his eyes

firmly ahead, in the direction he was going. His peripheries, focused in the direction of the mysterious moving female body, were on high alert.

Montgomery ordinarily believed the dead should be respected, no matter whether they rose from hell or descended from heaven. But he couldn't prevent himself from carelessly dropping the man's arms, letting them strike the ground, when he deposited the body.

There was no way he was going to hang around any longer than he needed to. He stood up from his crouched position and hustled back to the water's edge, almost taking a wrong turn on the way.

"Calm down, Monty," he said to himself. "This ain't no time to panic."

He was relieved to find the three remaining bodies were right where they should be. He took hold of the young unscorched boy and girl by an arm each and pulled them along the wet sand.

He would normally have taken just one at a time, but this wasn't any normal time. He deposited them beside the larger man, who he was also relieved to find hadn't moved a muscle.

"Just so," Montgomery said, a smile tinging his lips.

He turned and headed back into the tunnels and felt the familiar sense of relief and joy at having almost finished the job. He hustled back, a near skip in his step. He returned to the waterfront and found…

Nothing.

The elder female body was gone. The sand was where it should have been. The water gently lapped against the sand. Everything was in place. Save the dead body.

Dead body.

Montgomery spun around, flinching back in anticipation of someone striking him. But there was no one there.

A dead body had come back to life. Something new. Something dangerous.

"To hell with this," Montgomery said.

He climbed into the boat, rowed back out into the lake, left his boat at the jetty without tying it up, and ran into town. He entered the nearest pub and ordered his favorite glass of brown.

The stain on the wall that had always brought him solace with its various morphing shapes, no longer did. Each time he glanced at it, it was fixed in the same unflinching outline.

A dead body, lying in a position he had not set. And her eyes were open. She was looking directly at him.

Montgomery's jittering mouth, missing so many teeth, opened. He laughed to himself, beginning as a titter, before working up into a maniacal roar. It sounded odd even to him, even stranger to the bar flies who had never heard Montgomery so much as chuckle all his years.

"Montgomery," the barman said with genuine concern. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Montgomery said, stifling his laughter by biting on a knuckle. "'To hell with this,' I said. 'To hell with this'!"

The barman smiled, before turning to look at the other drinkers. The joke was lost on him.

In the caves Montgomery had said, "To hell with this." But now he realized the dead hadn't gone to hell. Instead, hell had come to them. Isn't that the funniest thing?

# 3.

BRYAN'S EYES fluttered open. He'd had the most vivid dream.

He'd imagined himself in a giant cave, the sounds bouncing off the hard stone walls, echoing endlessly and without end in the corners of his mind. He remembered the press of sand against his face, leaving an imprint.

He'd been aware of a man, his features unclear and indistinct, blurry and out of focus like an early model camera. He thought the man to be old. It was in the way he moved, the way he comported himself. But it could have just as easily have been a boy.

Bryan was shocked to find himself lying on the ground, peering up at a jagged ceiling of natural rock knives. The ground at his back was hard. And there was less grit here. Had the place he recalled been real? He would swear he'd been moved.

The last thing he remembered was being in a quicksand whirlpool that dragged him under the earth, a whirlpool he had willingly thrown himself in. It had taken him lower and lower, into the clutches of the abyss below…

It had gone dark. He'd been worried, concerned for Zoe, Cassie and Aaron. He lost his grip on their hands. He didn't know where he was going, but he had some faith that the sinkhole would take them to a better place—and not the shining white one in the sky with harp-playing winged creatures. He wanted to go somewhere better than the last world, that had been eviscerated by its own occupants.

He remembered very little after that, other than snatches of images and sounds. What had made him pass unconscious, he didn't know. Perhaps it had something to do with the sand's pressure. It might have been too much for him. Maybe too much for the others too.

The others.

Where were they?

Bryan moved to lift his arms to push himself up, but found they would not obey him. Was he injured? He concentrated on his limbs and then the rest of his body. He felt a little numb, his body exhausted, but no pain. He

applied pressure to his arms. Something was wrapped around his wrists and ankles. He'd been restrained.

He moved his eyes left to right, checking the peripheries as best he could. He commanded himself to lift his head, but it wouldn't budge. He could hardly move. He froze when he saw something out the corner of his eye.

Clothes. On bodies. He couldn't tell their shape and size, but they must have been the others. They were beside him, and he felt himself relax with relief. If they were together, things couldn't be that bad.

Bryan needed to rest. He didn't like the idea of letting himself go, to fade into that nothingness that was unconsciousness. But there was nothing he could do in his current state anyway. His eyes rolled back, despite his best efforts to keep them open, and he fell unconscious again.

# 4.

HIS EYES opened. Faster, and with more energy this time. He had no idea how much time had passed, but he could already feel the difference in his body. He turned his head to one side. The world swam in his vision. His head hurt like someone had been swinging hammers at it. He preferred the numbness.

His head felt heavy on his flimsy neck and didn't react well to his commands. But it did react, and that was an important improvement over the first time he'd woken up. He was in a cavern, large, with craggy walls. He remembered the two bodies he'd seen earlier out the corner of his eyes and turned to them. His breath caught in his throat.

There was blood. A lot of it. Dried and burnt, the bodies unrecognizable.

Bryan recalled the swirling miasma of the red hot magma and boulders the size of cars being tossed around like leaves in a strong wind. That could have done this. It *had* done this.

Then Bryan shook his head. No. This couldn't be Cassie and Aaron. He rejected the idea. These mashed up bodies couldn't possibly belong to anyone he knew or loved.

Tears stung his eyes and quivered, threatening to spill down his face, but never quite carrying through. His face scrunched up and he heard a low whine escape his throat, the cry of desperation.

These lifeless forms were the kids. They hadn't escaped. They hadn't gotten out. He had escaped with his life, largely untouched, while the kids had been fried to a crisp, beyond recognition. He couldn't live without Cassie. Not like this. He couldn't live with himself.

A rage overtook him. He forced himself up, difficult with his arms and legs tied, first into a crouched position, and then up onto his knees. He edged toward the bodies, the stench of their charred flesh stinging his nose. He fell upon them, pulling them close with his chin. He cried into them.

They never got a chance to be a family. They never got a chance to love each other the way they deserved. They had so much left to experience and

give to one another. All these feelings of pain and regret poured out of Bryan and into the two bodies he clutched tightly to himself.

“I’m sorry,” Bryan said. “I’m so, so sorry.”

There wasn’t anything else he could think to say. What else could he say?

And then he noticed their hands.

They were thick and powerful, strong, like they were used to physical labor. Aaron and Cassie hadn’t had a hard day’s work in their lives. They were students, used to studying at school with pen and paper. They would not have hands like this. Then how did they come to have them?

The obvious answer struck him like a thunder bolt, and hope swelled in his chest at the ramifications.

Because they weren’t Aaron and Cassie. They were someone else.

But who?

Bryan thought back to the bodies of the miners who had died in the previous world, and their funeral ceremony. They’d been lowered into a pit of magma, what was believed to be a passage to another world. How right the miners had been, though they could not have expected it to be this world.

And suddenly it all made sense. The old man he’d thought he’d dreamed, the water, the sand, this cavern. It was all the same thing. The process of laying the dead bodies to rest. Despite not having the same scorch marks, Bryan had been mistaken for dead, as a cousin to these unfortunate deformed bodies beside him.

Then if these bodies were not Cassie and Aaron, where were they?

Bryan sat back on his heels and looked around. His heart leapt.

Aaron and Cassie lay to one side, right beside where he’d lain. Why couldn’t he have looked in this direction first? Then he wouldn’t have had such a scare!

“Cassie!” Bryan said. “Aaron!”

He fell to his knees and edged closer. He checked them over, but found nothing wrong with them save a few grazes to their bare skin. They were in one piece, their hair wind blown from their faces. They appeared perfectly healthy.

Except they were unconscious.

Bryan put his face to Cassie’s cheek and nudged her.

“Cassie?” he said. “Cassie? Can you hear me? It’s Dad. Are you awake?”

She obviously wasn’t awake. Bryan lowered the delicate skin of his neck to her nose. He could feel her breath. He checked Aaron. He was breathing too.

Finally, Bryan could breathe too, letting out a lungful of relieved air. He smiled, unable to hide his happiness. He hugged them close and gently nudged them with his shoulder.

“You need to wake up,” Bryan said. “Come on. Get up.”

Aaron and Cassie muffled, grumbling under their breath.

Bryan paused. He thought he’d heard something from one of the tunnels that branched off the cavern they were lying in. It began as a low rumble, vibrating the air and making it quiver. It emanated from the darkness of one of the tunnels. Bryan eyed one tunnel after another, but couldn’t identify which one the sound was originating from.

It could have come from any direction.

What made it worse was the sound reverberated off the walls in Bryan’s cavern. It sounded like it came from the left, but when he turned his head, it sounded like it was coming from the right.

How was he meant to avoid something when he didn’t even know where it was coming from? He might escape, but end up running directly at the creature. It sounded big, whatever it was.

“Get up,” Bryan said to the kids, his voice low. “We have to go.”

The growl from the mystery tunnel grew louder. It was coming closer. Bryan couldn’t pick the kids up with his hands and feet tied.

“Damn it!” Bryan said.

He turned and shuffled toward a large rock on his knees. He was moving too slowly, so he got to his feet and hopped. He dived behind the rock and waited, hoping the creature hadn’t seen him. He wouldn’t wait to find out.

A small rock protruded from the dirt, half buried. It had a sharp edge on the top. Bryan turned his back and lowered himself onto it. He rubbed his restraints against it, sawing through it. He felt the strands snapping, coming loose, the heat rising against the skin of his wrists.

Where had Zoe gotten to? He hadn’t seen her since they had entered the Passage in the magma world, what felt like another lifetime. Could she have been taken to another world? Could she have ended up somewhere

else? Somewhere far away? He didn’t know. He couldn’t worry about that, not now. He needed to focus on saving the kids.

Bryan felt the rope give way. He massaged his wrists with his hands. It felt good to be free of the restraints. He leaned forward and began to do the same with his ankles.

If he could get loose he might still have time to get the kids free before the creature found them. There hadn’t been a sound from the tunnels for the past few minutes and-

Bryan froze. No growl. No grumble. Nothing. In his recent experience, that was never a good thing.

A puff of dust rose from a sharp, strong exhalation from a large nostril. Bryan caught the stench of reeking meat. The creature’s diet. It didn’t bode well.

Bryan daren’t turn to look over the boulder. He didn’t want to be there. He didn’t want to see or hear what the creature was going to do. Not if Bryan didn’t stand a chance of stopping it. He found himself doing what many prey in the wild did.

He froze.

# 5.

IT TURNED out freezing was the best thing Bryan could have done.

The creature stared directly at him, its large eyes piercing him to his soul, pinning him in place. Bryan had never been so terrified. Even his breaths came short and shallow. Luckily his bladder was already empty. The monster turned, the ground shaking with every step.

It wasn't the first time Bryan had seen such a monster. How could it be here now? Had they gone backward? Back to an earlier world? Was that even possible? He supposed anything was possible when you didn't completely understand the rules of the place you found yourself.

What was Bryan going to do? Wrestle the kids from the mouth of this huge beast? No. That wasn't going to happen. He would end up getting himself as well as the kids killed. He needed to watch what the monster did. And if it bent down to eat the kids? Then he would distract the monster to give the kids a little more time to come round.

He'd race through the tunnels, getting the monster to chase him. He'd almost certainly end up lost, and in all likelihood, eaten, but at least the kids might get away.

The monster bent down, its huge head sniffing the unconscious children. Its great dripping tongue protruded from its mouth and ran over its sharp teeth and thick lips, and then over the scorched bodies on the floor, covering them in a thick film of sticky saliva. It could taste their blood, no doubt, and would be the first on the menu.

For the first time since finding the kids, he prayed they wouldn't wake up. Not right then. It was the worst possible time to regain consciousness.

The great reptile lowered its head further, and for a moment Bryan thought it was going to consume the scorched bodies, but it didn't. It took another step forward, fully extended its tail, and bent down to scoop up one scorched body in each of its short, powerful claws. It wasn't careful with them, and let their heads drag along the ground.

The creature carried the bodies, with them swinging in its arms, down the same tunnel it must have entered through, its footsteps heavy and foreboding. Soon, it was gone.

Bryan emerged from his hiding place and ran toward the kids' prostrate forms. How could they still be unconscious after what had just happened to them? Had they been poisoned? Or struck with something? Why was it he was awake and walking around while they were still like this? Perhaps size had something to do with it.

He shook them, more violently this time. The kids' bodies flopped all over the place, but did not wake. He would have to carry them somewhere safe. Soon the monster would be back to take them away too. He couldn't let that happen.

Bryan bent down and scooped his arms under Cassie's knees and neck. He ran as fast as his legs could carry him toward a random tunnel. He stopped and put Cassie down. He wanted to take her farther away, but first he needed to get Aaron to safety too.

He turned to run back and get Aaron, and froze once he laid eyes on what was present inside the cavern. He crept back into the tunnel, and pressed his back to the wall, and let out a mouthful of air, silently.

The creature was there. How it had managed to creep into the main chamber so stealthily, Bryan didn't know. But there it was, crouched over Aaron's body.

The great beast peered down at the single body on the ground and looked around. It looked confused. It seemed to think there should have been another body there. It sniffed the ground, but couldn't see any sign of it. It contented itself with just the one it had now. It bent down and performed the same careful procedure of picking Aaron up using in its front claws.

The monster turned, its great long tail whipping out in a wide arc. Bryan pulled back just in time before it almost struck him.

Now here was a pretty pickle.

Bryan didn't like to leave Cassie by herself, but he couldn't let the monster take Aaron either. Who knew what it might do to him. He could carry Cassie on his back, but he might just end up feeding her to the monster by mistake. Plus, she would slow him down, making it difficult for him to escape with Aaron.

"Crap!" Bryan said out loud.

He didn't like it, but Cassie had a much better chance of survival if she stayed here. So would he and Aaron. He picked up a stick and wrote in the dirt: STAY HERE.

He tossed the stick aside and jogged back into the wide open cavern. He crossed to the tunnel the creature had entered. Bryan slowed down and began to edge inside.

# 6.

THE CREATURE was loud, its grunts and biting snarls echoing down the tunnel. With each sound, Bryan paused, pressing himself against the wall. The sound came suddenly, from nowhere, as if they emanated from right before him. There was a light at the end of the corridor, and the walls were damp with slime.

Bryan edged closer to the light. Once he got to it, he peered inside. It looked like the perfectly lit scene of a horror play. The creature's large muscular back was moving, blocking Bryan's view.

There were a pair of rocks in front of the door on either side. If he got to one of those he'd be able to see what was going on. But that meant stepping into the light. He remembered the beast could only see movement, not anything in light.

Bryan watched the monster carefully and rushed to hide behind the boulder. Not a second too soon, as the monster turned in Bryan's direction.

It picked up one of the burnt corpses and hefted it. It put the body down somewhere, taking care to place it just so. The beast appeared to be putting a great deal of effort into the activity, requiring it to focus.

In the light, it was easier to make out the details of the creature. It had a long snout with large pointy teeth and short front legs with vicious claws. One was badly chipped. It had a long tail and a crest on the top of its head that stretched all the way down his back to the tip of his long tail.

Bryan could only see what he could because of the streaks of light that came in through a hole in the roof, cast by what appeared to be a beautiful blue sky.

Bryan moved around the boulder, taking care to place his feet so as not to disturb the creature. There was a disgusting noise, nothing at all to do with the growls the monster made. Bryan couldn't put his finger on what it was… Until he saw it with his own eyes.

It was a machine. A modern-looking contraption, but with elements of something that would not have looked out of place in a torture garden. It had sharp spikes and razor sharp edges, a vicious machine used to hack and slash.

Bryan crept closer, and watched as the creature very delicately and carefully slid the scorched body onto a spike, like a small cloth puppet onto a finger.

The monster moved to one side, coming to a large pedal. Its footsteps shook the cavern, making small rocks dive from the roof and dust rain down on Bryan's head. The monster lifted its giant muscular leg and placed it on the large flat pedal. It exercised its huge muscles and pressed up and down, pumping. The machine came to life.

However advanced this machine was, it didn't have access to electricity. The giant creature had to provide its own power. Bryan couldn't believe what he was seeing. A monster operating a machine? He pinched himself. He felt it. He wasn't dreaming. What was going on?

Then he saw the horrific processes the machine was capable of. The body began to spin gently on its turntable and, as it did, a series of sharp knives descended from the ceiling, moving in concentric circles.

The knives were attached to an intricate mobile of shiny metal rods that bent and flexed around metal joints. It reminded Bryan of the innate intricacy of long spider legs. They moved in and out, back and forth, up and down, performing a dance to which Bryan had no idea was their purpose.

They came closer and closer to the lifeless body that spun on its squeaking turnstile. Then, finally, Bryan could see what they were going to do. They inched closer to the cadaver, until they pierced its skin and inserted themselves deep into its flesh. Still the body kept turning, the knives, sharp as anything Bryan had ever seen, slicing at the meat like it was paper.

They cleaved the flesh from the body cleaner and with greater efficiency than Bryan had ever witnessed, even from a professional butcher. Thick congealed blood dripped onto the platform and rolled into a large bowl. The flesh peeled and dropped from the bones like a seed from a grape.

Saliva dribbled from the dragon's thick moist lips, splattering across the floor. The sight of the blood and smell of the flesh should have driven it berserk, but it remained calm, restrained. It continued to pump at the pedal and watched the body turn, the knives doing their work. Finally, with just a few chips to the bones, the skeleton was all that remained of the scorched man, his flesh stripped clean from his body.

Bryan was certain that in no world, in no culture, would anyone have imagined the afterlife to consist of such turmoil as this. It was beyond the realm of imagination. This was clearly not heaven. It wasn't hell either, but simply another world, with its own rules and limitations. Bryan was certain he could never get used to such a place if such things were routine.

Still the creature did not stop pumping its pedal, up and down its leg went. The pedestal turned and the skeleton was lifted into the air, continuing to spin. Another piece of metal hooked into the frame, and it slid to the floor, hanging beside a twin skeleton.

There were a dozen of them, lined up like fancy dress costumes. It was merely the front line of dozens like it. They were all grinning. Some had missing ribs, cracked skulls and bent jaws, but they were largely in one piece.

Another arm began to lower down from the ceiling. It held a small box that blinked red. It approached the newest skeleton before savagely shoving itself into the chest cavity. Something squirted out of the arm, some kind of sticky material that fixed the box in place.

Finally, the creature stopped pressing the pedal. The platform continued to turn, gradually slowing, the remaining metal arms retracting up into the ceiling. The monster approached the bowl of blood and meat, what Bryan now recognized as a food trough, bent down, and began to feed.

Bryan was still recovering from what he'd just witnessed. He couldn't have seen what had just happened in front of him. He couldn't have. He must have been mistaken.

Next would be the second scorched man. And then it would be Aaron's turn if Bryan couldn't get him out of there in time. It wouldn't take long for the monster to finish its meal. If he was going to act, he needed to do it soon.

Bryan peered around the boulder at Aaron. His breath hitched in his throat.

Aaron was beginning to stir.

# 7.

THE MONSTER'S back was to Bryan as it gorged itself on the meat. It was ravenous. It was surprising to Bryan it could have waited so long to feed. It was slurping, dropping chunks of food over the floor. Its long tongue wiped at the bowl to get every last morsel.

Bryan turned to Aaron. He needed to warn Aaron to stop moving. If he didn't, the monster was going to see he wasn't dead and, presumably, kill him. There was something very sinister, deliberate and routine about this whole setup. Bryan didn't like it. The monster was simply going through the motions, doing what it had always done.

What it had been trained to do.

Bryan got down on his hands and knees and crawled toward Aaron, making slow, deliberate movements. He got to Aaron and then lay down beside him, their noses no more than an inch apart. The monster seemed content with its meal.

"Aaron," Bryan whispered.

He didn't move.

But the monster did. It turned to look in Bryan's direction. He lay still, unmoving, and hoped the monster wouldn't come investigating. He waited, not daring to check. Then he heard more munching and slurping. The monster was feeding again. Its tongue wiped around the bowl. It must have almost finished.

Aaron was still unconscious. Whatever movements he made earlier appeared to have been unconscious ones. Bryan would have to carry him away as he had Cassie.

Bryan looked up. The monster was still licking his food bowl. Perhaps his sense of smell was so strong that no matter how much he licked the bowl, he could never completely remove the scent of blood clean.

Bryan lifted himself up onto one shoulder, and then an elbow. He knelt at Aaron's head and bent down to lift him up. He never even got to brace the boy's weight. The monster had straightened up. Bryan's body turned to jelly and he hit the deck.

The creature's footsteps pounded the ground, thudding through Bryan's body like a second heartbeat. The monster arched its neck, its huge back bones popping.

Aaron began to stir once again.

Bryan's arm flashed out. He wrapped a hand over his mouth. Bryan felt Aaron stiffen beneath his grip. Aaron turned his head. Bryan felt the boy's lungs fill with oxygen, presumably to scream. Bryan pressed harder, forcing his hand over Aaron's mouth so he couldn't even breathe, never mind scream.

Aaron's eyes were wide, but they were alert and focused.

"Sh," Bryan mouthed.

From the creature's point of view, they would have looked like a pair of bodies, one piled on top of the other. At least, that was what Bryan was hoping.

He daren't say another word. Bryan's appearance had some effect on Aaron, and he calmed down, his eyes still wide as saucers. He knew that if Bryan was holding his hand over his face he was doing so for a very good reason.

And then he saw the reason, over Bryan's shoulder. His body tensed again. Bryan strengthened his arm, holding Aaron tight. If the creature had to take one of them, he was going to make sure it was himself, though he would ensure to give the monster a run for his money too.

The creature pressed his snotty nostrils into Bryan's back, the stench of blood and guts from its recent meal like a thick cloud. Some of the blood wiped off on Bryan's clothes. The creature licked it. Bryan was both disgusted and terrified.

The monster reached down with its short arms—still almost the length of a fully grown man—and picked the second scorched man up. His limbs hung lifelessly as the creature carried the body over to the machine and began its meat harvesting process all over again.

Bryan slowly released his hand, giving Aaron back control of his mouth. Bryan slowly began to sit up, focusing on the creature. He must have had a million questions, but he knew right then wasn't the time to ask.

Bryan nodded to the boulder behind him, to the one he'd hidden behind when watching the monster's horrific display.

The knives were coming down from the ceiling in their effortless dance, entered the corpse, and began hacking at the flesh. The blades made swift scything movements.

Aaron and Bryan made it to the boulder, but still neither of them spoke. They crept down the tunnel, feet silent as the grave. Only once they entered the wide open space of the cavern did they slow.

“Where are we?” Aaron said in a low whisper.

“In a cave,” Bryan said.

“Oh really, you think?” Aaron said. “Where’s Mom?”

“I don’t know,” Bryan said. “I woke here and she wasn’t there.”

“She must be around here somewhere,” Aaron said. “What about Cassie?”

“I found her,” Bryan said. “I tried to get you both out of here, but I ran out of time and could only get her out.”

“Where is she?” Aaron said.

“In a tunnel,” Bryan said. “This way. Come on.”

# 8.

FINDING the tunnel was very easy. It was directly opposite the path they took to get to the monster's torture cavern. It was even easier to find where he had deposited Cassie. The difficult part was knowing where she had gone.

"Well?" Aaron said. "Where is she?"

"She was right here," Bryan said.

"Are you sure you left her here?" Aaron said.

"Positive," Bryan said.

"A lot of these tunnels do look the same," Aaron said.

"No, it's this one," Bryan said.

He pointed to the message he'd written in the dirt. STAY HERE.

"She just ignored me," Bryan said.

"Imagine that," Aaron said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"As per freaking usual," Bryan said.

A great roar went up. The monster had just learned his final course was missing. And by sound of it, he really loved his dessert.

# 9.

ZOE RECALLED a rush of sand up her nostrils, forcing a path into her brain. She could hardly breathe. She must have passed out because the next thing she knew, she was in a wet place, soaked to the bone. Then she was in a dry place, lying on a pair of reeking bodies, their stench washed out only by a rinse of water. Zoe assumed it must have been a nightmare.

It's funny how you could do that sometimes, how you could know you were in a dream even while you were still inside it. But toward the end it had been too real, too vibrant, too difficult to wave off as a mere dream.

She'd been lying on her back on a harsh rock when she'd become conscious again. When she was young she'd had a cheap mattress that resembled the Himalayas, and it was that thought that had stirred her from her dream.

She forced herself to get up. She'd stumbled, falling to her knees, before getting back to her feet again. She leaned against a wall and heard someone coming. Who, she didn't know. In all honestly, she didn't care. She just wanted to get away from them. If there was one thing she'd learned about being in these underground worlds, it was that she knew she couldn't trust the locals.

There were good people, of course, but there were also many bad ones. They had grown up in a world a far cry from the one Zoe was used to. There was no telling who they were and what they really wanted. She wanted to get away from whoever the figure coming toward her was.

Zoe stumbled toward a tunnel and braced herself against the craggy surface. Her head swam and she couldn't see straight. She didn't know where she was going or what she was doing. She thought the man was heading toward her. She turned and headed deeper into the cave.

No matter how deep or fast she went, the man behind her was always hot on her heels, his footsteps echoing off the hard craggy walls. He kept up with her no matter how fast she went.

Zoe tried to remember where she was going, how many corners she'd turned, and in which direction, keeping a running tally of *left, right, left,*

*left, right, straight forward, right, third on the left…* But she soon ran into trouble. She got muddled and couldn't recall the correct order.

She strengthened her resolve. She didn't need to worry about that right then. She needed to escape the man who was still chasing her, whoever he was, and get somewhere safe.

He was still hot on her heels. Zoe kept going, kept forcing herself on. If she didn't, and she stopped, she'd never find Bryan and the kids again.

There was a rushing, roaring sound that Zoe recognized immediately. Finally, some luck in this place. She came to a large open space. In the center was a cascading waterfall. But it wasn't just one waterfall, but three combined into one. A mist escaped to one side, rising like a cloud.

Zoe approached the water's edge, fell to her knees, cupped her hands, and splashed the ice cold water over her face and neck. Her headache flashed behind her eyes, but it was worth it.

She was wide awake now. It was hard not to be when doused with freezing cold water. She was alive, her brain cells firing on all cylinders. She had a series of revelations all at once.

First, the man hadn't been following her. If he had, he would have been here by now, grabbing her by the scruff of the neck. Then what were the footfalls she'd heard? Surely someone had been following her?

She chuckled, putting a hand to her face. She almost felt the blood rush to her cheeks. It was herself, her own footsteps bouncing off the walls, reflecting back at her. She had been running from herself. They had only stopped when she had entered this large cavern, where the sounds didn't bounce or reflect back to her eardrums. There was no man, only herself.

The second revelation was in relation to her recent memories. Though still fuzzy and warped by light and sound, they snapped into focus. There were others lying on the sand beside the water, just as there had been other bodies lying on top of her in the boat. Those lined up on the beach could not have gotten there by themselves. The lines were too uniform. Someone had put them there. But why? For what purpose? It couldn't have been for anything good.

The third revelation was the biggest, and the most shocking. She stood up and stepped out of the crevice she'd stumbled into at the water's edge. It was a giant clawed footprint. One of its nails alone was as big as Zoe's hand.

"What the…?" Zoe said out loud.

She'd seen tracks like this before. In the first world they'd come to.

"But it can't be…" Zoe said.

There was a roar, loud and vibrant, echoing from the tunnels on her left. She got up and ran to the tunnel entrance, but didn't enter it. Zoe could tell by the number of times it rebounded that it wasn't close. It was some distance away. But not far enough for her liking. She entered the tunnel and followed the sound, taking three turns before pausing.

She listened for the next roar, before backing up and heading down another tunnel. The roar was desperate, one of anger and annoyance. There was only one person she knew who could drive someone to distraction like that.

"Bryan," Zoe said.

And if Bryan was there, there was a good chance the kids would be with him. She picked up her pace, building to a jog. She slowed when the roars died. She waited to hear another before turning down a different tunnel. She felt along the rough tunnel walls as she went, keeping her eyes ahead.

Before she knew it, the roar was full in her ears, echoing, loud and deafening. She was right on top of it. But where was it?

Then something lurched out of the darkness. And Zoe screamed.

# 10.

THE MONSTER was hot on Bryan and Aaron’s heels. No matter how fast they ran, how many corners they took, the creature was always right behind them. And they needed to keep changing tunnels, Bryan knew. It was their only advantage against a beast as large as the one chasing them.

Out in the open, the monster would outpace them with ease. But constantly changing direction gave Bryan and Aaron the edge they needed to stay ahead.

That was, until the monster changed tactics.

The creature’s footfalls slowed, becoming faint. Bryan and Aaron slowed in accordance with it, allowing their lungs to refill to their full capacity. But they didn’t stop.

“Do you think it stopped chasing us?” Aaron said.

“It’ll never stop,” Bryan said. “But he might slow down for a while.”

“How does it know which way we’re going?” Aaron said.

“Our shoes,” Bryan said. “It must be able to hear the sound of them bouncing off the walls.”

Bryan slowed to a stop and bent down to pull his shoes off.

“Take off your shoes,” he said.

“What for?” Aaron said. “There are sharp rocks down here. We’ll cut our feet open.”

“Better sharp rocks than the teeth of a monster,” Bryan said.

Aaron wasn’t so sure, but he didn’t argue. He slipped his shoes off and carried them in his hands. Bryan led them down the tunnel, replacing speed with stealth.

The tunnels were deathly dark, silent as the grave. Bryan pulled to a stop. He held out a hand and gently pressed it against Aaron’s chest. He stopped.

There was something strangely familiar about this situation. The deathly silence, so quiet it seemed like the world had its beady eye focused intently on the scene taking place. Bryan stepped back, pressing his back to the wall. He gently pressed Aaron back too.

They waited.

Bryan’s senses were on overdrive. He sensed danger out there in the darkness, but his senses were too weak to give him enough information. He had learned to trust his gut, and waited. What did they have to lose by waiting a little longer?

Bryan’s arm still laid across Aaron’s chest, keeping him back. Bryan forgot it was placed there. Aaron began to lean forward. Bryan pressed back, soft but firm. Aaron grew tense. It took a moment for Bryan to realize why.

Something was in the darkness. And it was moving.

It was hard to say how they knew something was there. There was no light, so there was nothing to see. The tunnel was silent, so there was nothing to hear. It was the smell, Bryan realized. That underused sense in humans. It was the stench of rotting flesh and dried blood from the scorched bodies. That was what their senses had picked up on, their conscious minds slow to realize.

The creature had somehow managed to sneak ahead of them, cutting off their escape route. It had gone into stealth mode and waited for them to present themselves. This was an expert hunter. It was clever, smart, and knew these caves, its domain, like the back of its stunted claw. Furthermore, it had its sharpened skills to hunt.

If Bryan didn’t know better, he would have said the creature was enjoying itself. The majority of its meals were fed to it, coming in the form of dead bodies. Now it had live meals and was able to utilize the weapons and instincts its ancestors had developed over millions of years.

It was close. It was going to get them. If Bryan put out his hand, he was certain he would have felt the scaly skin of its hide.

There was a pair of screams from deep in the cave system. The monster grunted, and then slowly, very slowly, like something that did not want to leave this place, began to withdraw itself. Soon the space returned to normalcy, the creature taking its stench with it.

Bryan and Aaron remained silent, listening to the darkness. Then the monster gave up its stealthy pose, its footfalls once again heavy on the rocky floor.

“That was lucky!” Aaron said. “Now, let’s get out of here!”

“Not so lucky, as it turns out,” Bryan said.

“Why?” Aaron said.

“Those screams,” Bryan said. “Didn’t you recognize whose throats they came from?”

“No,” Aaron said. “Why?”

“It was Cassie and Zoe,” Bryan said.

# 11.

ZOE RAN as fast as she dared, lifting her knees high to avoid any potential traps and things that might catch her feet. She needed to find the others. She hated being alone. She held out both her hands to feel along the walls. She turned to look behind her as she rounded another corner.

A flash of white, a hard thud to her forehead, and Zoe screamed, on her ass. She hesitated only a moment before getting to her feet and turning around to run in the opposite direction.

“Look where you’re going!” a voice said.

Zoe had to double take to make sure she wasn’t imagining the voice.

“Cassie?” she said.

“The one and only,” Cassie said.

Zoe helped Cassie to her feet. She wrapped her arms around her tight. Cassie was unprepared, and her arms flailed out to either side. Zoe pulled back.

“What are you doing here?” she said.

“I’m on a scavenger hunt,” Cassie said. “What do you think I’m doing here? I’m trying to find the way out. As I’m assuming you are too. I’ve got bad news for you if you’re hoping to find the exit that way. There isn’t one.”

“I wasn’t looking for the way out,” Zoe said. “I was looking for you, and the others.”

“Well, they’re not this way,” Cassie said. “I would have seen them.”

Cassie paused, her eyes drifting back down the tunnel she had just emerged from.

“Do you hear anything?” she said.

Zoe listened.

“No,” she said. “Why?”

“Because until a moment ago there were loud footsteps of a monster chasing after me,” Cassie said.

Zoe smiled.

“I made the exact same mistake earlier,” she said. “I thought someone was chasing me, but really it was just my own footsteps echoing behind

me.”

“If those were my footsteps I need a serious diet,” Cassie said.

“Sounds reflecting back at us can take on all kinds of abstractions,” Zoe said.

“Roars too?” Cassie said.

“No,” Zoe said. “I heard them too. That’s what I was working my way towards.”

“Wait,” Cassie said. “You were heading *towards* the big bad monster?”

“It’ll be chasing something,” Zoe said. “Or someone. As I’m here, why wouldn’t it be Bryan, Aaron or you?”

“It was definitely chasing me earlier,” Cassie said. “But it’s gone quiet now.”

“Predators don’t suddenly stop pursuit of their prey,” Zoe said. “Unless they’re resigned to the fact they’ve lost it.”

“Or begin getting close enough to stalk them,” Cassie said.

She turned to look at Zoe. Both their faces had drained of color. They turned to the darkness in either direction. Zoe hadn’t been afraid of the dark since she was a child, but right then all those night terrors filled her heart at the same moment.

There was a soft intake of breath, so soft they both almost missed it. They shared a look. Whatever it was, it was right beside them. They needed to run, and run quick. Staying still wasn’t going to help them. They needed to move.

The intense heat began as a single intense spark, but it quickly ignited, and grew to a voluminous cloud of fire that bellowed and raced toward them.

Zoe and Cassie ran, pumping their legs as hard as they could, entering the darkness without checking where they were going. If they knocked themselves unconscious while running, at least death would be less painful.

# 12.

BRYAN AND AARON slowed, panting and out of breath. Aaron bent over, then lay on his back, exhausted.

“You should stand up,” Bryan said, tugging on Aaron’s arms. “You need to expand your lungs and use your muscles as a pump to get the blood moving.”

“I can’t,” Aaron said. “Let me lay here. I’m okay.”

“You won’t be,” Bryan said.

Aaron grunted and let Bryan pull him up onto his feet.

“Wait,” Aaron said. “Do you hear that?”

There was a light slapping noise, like a pair of hands clapping. It was getting louder, closer.

“If it’s the monster, just let it come,” Aaron said. “It can eat me. I can’t take another step.”

“It’s not the monster,” Bryan said, squinting at the darkness to make out what it was.

Shapes danced in the dim light. It was difficult for Bryan to make out who—or what—it was. It wasn’t small. And then the figures became clearer suddenly, lit by an intense light that nearly blinded Bryan. He threw up an arm to protect himself. Arms and legs pumped in unison, the figures haggard and drawn.

Bryan’s heart swelled. It was Zoe and Cassie! They were alive! And then he saw the expressions on their faces. They looked pained. And terrified.

“We need to get moving again,” Bryan said.

“I can’t,” Aaron said. “Go on without me.”

“If you don’t run, you’ll be going on without your head,” Bryan said. “Come on!”

Bryan and Aaron ran alongside Zoe and Cassie as they beat a trail down the tunnel. There was a burning smell that accompanied the girls. Bryan pushed it from his mind and focused on placing his feet.

“Why don’t you have your shoes on?” Zoe said.

“To camouflage the noise our feet made,” Bryan said.

“Did it work?” Zoe said.
“Not if we’re running with people still wearing theirs, no,” Bryan said.

# 13.

“IN HERE!” Bryan said. “Quick!”

The doorway was large, a little too big for Bryan’s liking but there was nothing for it. Everywhere else in this place was only tunnels. This was the first room they had found. They filed inside.

The creature attempted to follow them, burying itself up to the neck in the doorway. It could not squeeze through, its head and body moving side to side to gain every inch it could through the doorway. It had something strapped to its back, what appeared to be some kind of metal armor. It was the family’s saving grace, and kept catching on the doorway.

The monster threw back its head and a stream of fire leapt from its blackened lips, sending out a spray like a flamethrower up at the cavern’s ceiling.

“Woah,” Aaron said.

Bryan glanced at Zoe, and then double took. He slapped at her back.

“What?” Zoe said. “What is it?”

“You’re on fire,” Bryan said.

“The fire must have gotten closer than I thought,” Zoe said. “You don’t think he can get in here, do you?”

Bryan looked the situation over. The monster was jammed in there pretty tight. He was still struggling to get through, straining his gigantic muscles.

“He might,” Bryan said. “But not yet. We have a little time. What happened to you, anyway? We all woke up in the same room.”

“I woke up early, I guess,” Zoe said. “The rest of you were asleep too?”

“Asleep?” Bran said. “It didn’t feel much like sleep to me.”

“I’m not so sure,” Zoe said. “Maybe we were all exhausted and our bodies were recovering themselves.”

“Maybe,” Bryan said. “Some of the things I saw did remind me of dreams, the way they looked and felt.”

The monster pulled itself backward through the door. It glared at the family, at its lost meal. Its footsteps headed away.

“It’s gone,” Zoe said, stepping forward.

“Woah, woah, woah,” Bryan said. “Cool your jets there, partner.”

“Why?” Zoe said. “You heard it leave.”

“I heard it walk away down one tunnel,” Bryan said. “There’s no telling where it really went. It could have looped around, waiting for us.”

Zoe smiled.

“You’re overestimating him,” she said.

“No,” Bryan said. “I’m not. He cut me and Aaron off, knowing ahead of time where we were going to be. A dumb animal doesn’t do that.”

“Bryan’s right, Mom,” Aaron said. “This monster, whatever it is, is smart.”

“Then how do you suggest we get out of there?” Zoe said. “It’s a dead end.”

Bryan turned and appraised their location. It was a large area with two dozen curved shapes sat shrouded with cloth. To the right was a pool of still water. Bryan approached it and peered into its depths.

“It’s an underground pool of water,” Bryan said. “It looks like it goes down a long way.”

Cassie crouched and put her fingers into it. She shivered as she stood up.

“It’s freezing cold,” she said. “I saw a waterfall on the way here. Maybe this is part of that system.”

“Maybe,” Bryan said. “Was it a steep drop?”

“Yes,” Zoe said. “We’ll never survive it.”

“Then maybe this might help,” Aaron said.

He stood beside one of the cloaked shapes and had pulled part of its tarpaulin off.

“There are twenty-five of them,” Aaron said. “They look like some kind of transport. They’re on rails.”

“What do you suppose they are?” Bryan said.

“Only one way to find out,” Zoe said.

She moved to the vehicle beside Aaron and tugged the tarpaulin completely off. The cover fell away. Those assembled gave a sharp intake. It wasn’t that it looked so out of place hidden here in the mountains, the shiny metal making warped reflections of the inner cave, but the fact they had all seen this thing before.

“It’s the submersible,” Zoe said.

“The what?” Aaron said.

“The submersible,” Cassie said. “We came across it while you were aboard the Mary Celeste. You saw it too, under the sea when it attacked the Mary Celeste.”

“We spent all that time in the nest at the top of the mountain,” Aaron said. “Why didn’t you tell me about this sooner?”

“I guess it must have slipped my mind,” Cassie said.

“It’s well and truly fastened there now,” Aaron said. “What’s so special about it?”

“Nothing, so far as we know,” Bryan said. “But what is it doing here?”

Zoe moved to the next covered vehicle and pulled the cover off. It was an exact replica of the first. As was the third, and the fourth. They didn’t look at any of the others. They didn’t need to. It was obvious judging by their shape. They were all the same.

“How did they get here?” Zoe said.

“The same way we did, I suppose,” Bryan said.

“Yes,” Zoe said. “But… how?”

“Anything I say will be a guess at best,” Bryan said. “Who knows?”

“Someone clearly does,” Zoe said. “Someone in this world.”

ROOOAAARRRR!

The whole cave shook at the monster’s booming bellow. Then there was the rushing thump of heavy feet on the cave floor.

CRUNCH!

The family could make out the powerful hind legs of the creature as it slammed itself and its immense weight into the doorway arch.

“Looks like someone got tired of waiting,” Zoe said.

“Judging by the falling rocks, it doesn’t look like he’ll need to wait much longer,” Bryan said.

Huge great cracks appeared above the doorway like the lines in an old woman’s smile. Rocks were already beginning to fall, shattering on the floor. The monster took a step back and slammed its weight into the wall again, dislodging more rocks.

“We need a way out of here,” Cassie said.

There was nothing they could use inside the room.

“The only way out is through the door,” Aaron said. “Or the pool of water.”

“Veto the door,” Cassie said.

“I second that motion,” Zoe said.

“The water it is then,” Bryan said.

“You’re forgetting we wouldn’t survive five minutes in there,” Zoe said.

“Not by ourselves, no,” Bryan said. “But we could with the latest in submersible technology.”

It took a moment for Bryan’s meaning to crystallize in Zoe’s mind. She turned to the row of submarines. Of course. It was obvious. But then, the best ideas were always simple, and this was about as simple as they came.

# 14.

THUD! THUD! THUD!

The slamming of the monster's weight against the front wall was the countdown the family didn't need.

They moved behind the first submersible and pushed. It was already loaded onto twin metal tracks and slid easily into the water. The family jumped on board and pressed and pried at the smooth glass surface.

"Any ideas guys?" Bryan said.

They scrambled across the surface to locate the door handle, but couldn't find it.

"Here!" Aaron said.

His hands had located a small recess. He slipped his fingers into it, pressed down, felt a click, and then pulled up to open it. He wasn't strong enough. Bryan grabbed it and heaved.

"We should take one pod each," Cassie said.

"No time," Bryan said. "Everyone get in."

They piled inside, Zoe and the kids wrapping themselves around the back of the driver's seat. Bryan jumped into the seat and pulled the door closed behind him. It clicked, latching into place.

Bryan grabbed the joystick and pressed all the buttons he could see, and flicked all the switches for good measure. A series of lights came on, flashing, but for the life of him, Bryan couldn't locate the on switch.

"Guys?" Bryan said. "A little help?"

The cavern's ceiling was caving in, rocks the size of large dogs raining down, splashing into the water and tossing up white wash. A few smacked the pod's roof, breaking and running down the side.

The monster had jammed itself under the newly widened door, and roared, screeching as it dug in its flanks and forced itself against the overhang. The metal pack on its back cried out as the creature pushed itself further inside. The rocks smacked its snout, making it angry. It thrashed harder.

"There!" Aaron said.

He leaned forward and pressed a button on the terminal. The little machine rumbled into life, a cat's meow compared to the lion's roar behind them. But the monster was working itself free, the cavern disintegrating around it.

"Go, go, go, go, go!" Zoe said, slapping the back of Bryan's chair with her palm.

"I'm trying!" Bryan said. "But the controls are screwy!"

He pushed and pulled at the joystick. It made no logical sense to him. Finally the little pod jolted forward. They were going to collide with the wall ahead.

"Down, down, down!" Zoe said.

"Quit backseat driving!" Bryan said.

He pushed forward on the joystick, and the pod began to lower. Slowly.

Looking back, Zoe saw the gaping mouth of the monster as it widened to bite into the little pod. Zoe turned away, not wanting to look, as if that might prevent it from happening.

The little pod entered the darkness of the water and they sank further.

They were away!

CRUNCH!

The monster's jaws crushed the back of the pod, squeezing it, crushing it like it was nothing but an empty can of pop. But the little pod kept going, pulling against the might of the great beast.

Bryan yelled and turned the handles, full lock, in either direction. The monster's jaws followed, the tendons in its jaws and neck tightening, but a creature's jaws can only go so far before it must stop. They were going to snap if the monster didn't let go soon. Finally, the monster did, though not of its own free will.

The pod bolted forward, as if given a shot of adrenaline having escaped the clutches of the demonic monster.

The creature buried its head back in the pool, but the pod was nowhere to be seen. It tossed its head and emitted a tremendous roar of rank disgust.

Those in the pod didn't hear it, as they moved at a gentle, but serene pace through the water.

"No sweat," Bryan said.

"No sweat for you, maybe," Zoe said. "Plenty for us."

“Do you think one of these days we might go somewhere we don’t need to fight for our lives every second?” Cassie said.

“Where would the fun be in that?” Bryan said.

# 15.

THE WATER flowed gently and smoothly like a family ride at a theme park.

“This isn’t so bad,” Bryan said.

“Maybe not for you,” Zoe said. “We’re cramped in the back.”

“I’m quite comfortable,” Bryan said, rubbing it in.

“I don’t want to alarm anyone, but-” Aaron said.

“When you say it like that, how can we not be alarmed?” Cassie said.

“I’m wet,” Aaron said. “Water is leaking in somewhere.”

“We’re underwater,” Bryan said. “It’s to be expected.”

“We’re in a waterproof underwater pod,” Zoe said. “It is certainly not to be expected.”

“It won’t matter for long anyway,” Bryan said.

“Why’s that?” Cassie said.

“Because the waterfall is just up ahead,” Bryan said. “Hold on!”

The calmness of the water was disrupted, churned up like white rapids over sharp rocks. It was incredible how fast the water’s temperament changed. The water roared around them, infused with raging bubbles.

“Is it a long drop?” Cassie said.

“Does it make a difference?” Zoe said.

“Not really, I suppose,” Cassie said.

Bryan braced himself on the terminal. The others held onto Bryan’s chair and the handholds around them. It was the best they had. This was going to be painful.

The water evolved into a raging tempest, turning white. The little pod was thrust up onto the surface. They floated there for a moment, getting a good look at the cavern roof about them, and then perched on the edge of the waterfall. It was a long way down.

“It didn’t seem this high from the ground!” Zoe said, pulling back at the sight.

“Nothing we can do about it now!” Bryan said.

The pod floated over the edge like flotsam. Lights on the terminal flashed and a noise wept. It didn’t sound happy. The pod lost all sense of

gravity, like a rollercoaster, but without the health and safety standards. The fall didn't last long, a few seconds at most.

The family took the impact well as there was little space for them to get thrown around. Bryan suffered the worst, his head flying forward and smashing on the joystick. It was covered with rubber, so the impact wouldn't cause too much damage. He hoped.

The small lake was surprisingly deep. The little pod never made contact with its floor. It hissed as it rose to the surface, the water spilling over it, impossible to make out clear distinctive shapes. The monster could have been standing there waiting, wagging its tail for all they knew.

Bryan pushed the pod door open. It rose up on bent hinges. There was no monster. For now.

Bryan drove the little pod toward the water's edge and climbed out. He helped the others out too.

"What do we do with the pod?" Zoe said.

"We leave it here," Bryan said. "Someone will find some use for it someday."

"As an expensive fountain," Aaron said.

"I don't like to litter," Zoe said.

Bryan chuckled.

"I think the authorities will be lenient on us, considering what we've been through," he said.

"I wouldn't be so sure," Zoe said.

"How do we get out of here?" Bryan said.

"This tunnel," Zoe said, walking toward it. "Other than that, I don't remember the way out."

"It's better than where we were," Bryan said. "A lot closer to home."

The family entered the tunnel and were filled with dread, visited by the same emotions they'd experienced when they were last there.

"What do you think it was?" Cassie said. "It looked like a dinosaur to me."

"It breathed fire," Aaron said. "It couldn't have been a dinosaur."

"Of course it wasn't a dragon," Bryan said. "Dragon's don't exist."

"We thought dinosaurs were extinct before we came down here," Zoe said.

"Dinosaurs are extinct from the surface," Bryan said. "The ones we saw were anomalies, that's all."

“And dragons couldn’t have gone extinct on the surface too, and only reside down here?” Zoe said. “The Chinese have believed in dragons for thousands of years. It’s possible they might have known about a real-life monster like this.”

“Dragons breathe fire,” Bryan said. “This monster didn’t.”

“Yes it did,” Cassie said. “Look.”

She turned, grabbed a handful of her hair and showed it to Bryan and Aaron. It was black and singed at the end.

“You think I stopped off at a salon on the way here?” she said.

“I assumed it was escaping gas or something,” Bryan said.

“No,” Zoe said. “It was the dragon. I heard it inhale and breathe out when it blew the flames at us. There is no question it came from the beast. And, if you got a closeup look at its lips, you can see where the flames come out. The monster is not flame retardant. Its lips were melted and scarred from the fires it breathed. God knows how painful it must be.”

“Yes,” Bryan said drily. “Poor thing. I feel sorry for it already.”

“But that sounds to me like a mark against it being a dragon,” Aaron said. “If it was born to breathe fire, shouldn’t it be able to withstand a little heat?”

They came to a fork in the road.

“Should we split up?” Aaron said.

“Not on your life,” Bryan said. “We stick together, no matter what.”

“Wait,” Cassie said. “What’s this?”

She was looking at something on the wall. She put her fingers to it.

“It’s an arrow,” Zoe said. “Do you think it points to the way out?”

“Or to a trap,” Bryan said.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Zoe said. “Besides, I want to get out of here as quickly as I can. This place gives me the creeps.”

“You and me both,” Bryan said.

“Let’s follow it,” Aaron said. “We haven’t got anything to lose. We’re hungry and thirsty and we need to get out of here if we’re to feed ourselves.”

They entered the tunnel the arrow pointed at. It wound around a slight bend before coming to another fork. They searched, and after a little time, discovered the arrow on the opposite wall to where they had found the first one. Clearly they shouldn’t expect the notations to be in the same location at all times.

At each fork in the road, they had to search. Sometimes the signs were covered in overgrown moss, or washed away by rain, or too high or low for them to see clearly. Wherever they were heading, they were getting closer to it.

“What confuses me the most are the machines we found,” Bryan said. “The pods. It’s too much of a coincidence they have nothing to do with the other one we saw in the pirate world, don’t you think?”

The air suddenly smelled fresh and clean. They didn’t realize the tunnels and caves brought a certain mildew scent with them, damp, thick and earthy. They’d been in them for so long they’d grown accustomed to it. It wasn’t altogether unpleasant, but it wasn’t exactly Chanel either. They didn’t need to follow the arrows any longer. They could just follow their noses. The view that welcomed them took their breath away.

The sun was warm on their faces and illuminated rolling green hills with blooming wild flowers. The world was bright and yellow and shiny. In the middle distance to their left was a dense forest. Before them, a huge shimmering lake that fed into the caves to their right. And there was a town, only the church steeple visible over the woodland.

The family filled their lungs. They couldn’t have been happier to be out of the dingy caves.

“Where shall we head?” Cassie said.

“Toward the town I think,” Bryan said. “We can find food and shelter. And they might know a way out of this place.”

“Or we might end up being on the menu,” Zoe said. “We should be careful.”

“If they’ve got churches they should at least have some semblance of technology and development,” Bryan said.

“If we head out now we might get there by nightfall,” Zoe said.

“Then what are we waiting for?” Bryan said.

They stepped into the thigh-high grass and began to traipse through it. Aaron lowered his hands to brush against the soft clumps of seeds at the top of each blade.

GRRRRRRR

The sound was low and barely audible, but it sent a shiver up each family member’s spine, bringing a chill that reached from the bottom of their feet all the way to the top of their heads. They turned in unison to identify the cause of the sound.

A small flock of birds pulled up out of a nosedive and rose high into the sky, flapping to climb at a steeper angle. They seemed to notice something odd about the cave entrance they had been rushing toward.

Standing almost out of sight, with the majority of its body hidden inside a cave, the great beast that had pursued them was now perched, waiting for them to emerge. It had given away its position, perhaps by accident in its preemptive excitement, or on purpose, savoring the chase yet to come. But it hadn't run for them, not yet.

And then its body tensed, its legs coiled, and its head bent down, in line with the creature's long spine.

"Not again!" Aaron said.

He turned and ran before the others reacted. But they were all off the starting block before the great beast was. There was no more time to take in the view, no more time to breathe in the fresh air. They needed to hurry toward the town and hope someone there would take pity on them.

Judging by their latest brushes with world locals, there wasn't much chance of that.

# 16.

THE FAMILY had unknowingly experienced a series of small lucky breaks. The first was they had already made it around the curve of the lake, and the beast would need to traverse this area too if it was to catch them. It gave the family a small, but not insignificant, head start.

The second impact of emerging on the opposite side of the cave system was the monster hadn't been able to spot them until they were already halfway to the forest.

The final lucky break was the monster being unable to stifle its growl. It would have undoubtedly been in a much stronger position had it not, but there was no way to take it back. It had shown its hand, and now it had to make up for it.

It was certainly making the best attempt it could at doing so. Its legs were long and muscular, and it stretched them to their full length to catch up to the family.

The family tore across the vast expanse, pumping their already exhausted and aching limbs, toward the thick copse of woodland that bordered the town. The monster's crashing footsteps thundered and grew louder, until the earth was shaking and the trees cracked and snapped under its weight as it plowed through them.

"This way!" Bryan shouted.

He turned, taking them at a right angle, out of the range of falling trees that fell like ancient Roman pillars, crashing at their feet. The smashing continued, the pounding of heavy footsteps never ceased, but now it was behind them, sinking away.

The family never stopped, never ceased moving, but Bryan was always aware of the scene they were leaving behind them. Once the crashing stopped, Bryan skidded to a halt.

"Stop, stop, stop, stop, stop!" he said.

"Why are we stopping?" Cassie said through heaving breaths.

"The monster," Bryan said. "It's stopped."

"So?" Zoe said. "Isn't that a good thing?"

“Not if it’s looking for us, knowing we changed direction,” Bryan said. “If it can hear us, know which direction we’ve come, it might cut us off from the town.”

Zoe peered through the foliage. She could make out a tall wall made of tree trunks. Between the woodland and the wall was a wide clearing. She thought she could spot a moat too, but she wasn’t certain.

“Are you sure?” Zoe said. “It doesn’t look far.”

“It doesn’t need to be far for the monster to get us,” Bryan said.

“Did you see what was on its back?” Aaron said.

“I was too busy running away from its razor sharp jaws, funnily enough,” Cassie said.

“Looked like some kind of metal box,” Aaron said. “It’s weird, don’t you think?”

“So what do we do?” Zoe said.

“We creep through the woodland,” Bryan said. “He might double back to check on where we’ve gone.”

“So we should keep going,” Zoe said.

“Unless he decides to try and cut us off,” Bryan said. “He has a fifty percent chance of choosing the right direction if he does.”

“Then we should continue in this direction,” Cassie said. “Creeping, like Dad said. That way, even if the monster tries to cut us off, he can’t, because he’ll think we couldn’t have come this far. He’ll think he made a mistake and try to go back and check the other direction.”

“He’s not a man,” Aaron said. “We don’t know his intelligence level. He might not think anything at all.”

“We can assume it’s relatively high,” Bryan said. “You can tell by the way he hunts, by the way he’s always ready to surprise us in whatever we decide to do. I think Cassie’s right. That seems like the best course of action to me.”

The family crouched down and crept through the woodland on their forearms. They made a little noise, of snapping foliage and skittering of rodents in the undergrowth, but the monster was far enough away that it wouldn’t have heard them.

But the monster was on the move too.

Its footsteps were softer, quieter, but it was at a disadvantage: its sheer size made it impossible for it to creep, hindered by the woodland as it was.

Birds cawed and broke into the sky, flapping. It gave some indication of where the huge monster was. The family kept going, heading through the undergrowth, and though their legs ached—they were now in a squat position for forty or fifty minutes—they never stopped. The town was visible to their left, always there, tantalizing and close, but yet so far.

They were slow, but silent. They were moving, and that was enough for now. The woodland began to grow thin, and the family were losing their protection.

“We’re going to have to make a break for it,” Bryan said. “For the town. The gates aren’t all that far away. We can get to them before the monster can get to us. Plus, it’s probably still looking for us in the wrong part of the wood.”

“What if the town doesn’t open their gate to us?” Zoe said.

“What if they do?” Bryan said.

He let the opportunity hang before them, tantalizing like golden fruit.

“Our only other choice is breaking out and hoping the monster isn’t looking in our direction while we head toward that other woodland over there,” Bryan said. “If he does, then we’ll be in exactly the same situation there as we are here. But if we’re successful, and he doesn’t see us, then we can camp out there, survive till he leaves, and then make a break for it.”

“But he might camp out here too,” Zoe said. “We’d have no way of knowing. And then we’d have to run even farther to get to the town. I say we go for it now, while he’s still confused and looking for us.”

“Me too,” Cassie said. “I’d rather get it over with.”

“Aaron?” Bryan said.

“Let’s do it,” Aaron said. “I’ll die of exhaustion, but let’s do it.”

“Then we’re really doing this,” Bryan said.

He too thought it was the right decision, but it wasn’t without its risks. They would need to ensure—as best they could, in any case—that the monster was as far from them as possible so they could make the best dash they could.

The family approached the clearing’s edge, on the side closest to the town. But they didn’t step out far. They had no intention of revealing their position any sooner than they had to.

The woodland was silent, as if waiting and watching with bated breath the scene about to unwind before them. There was a wide clearing between

the family and town. They could see figures on the walls. The family waved at them, but the figures apparently couldn't see them, and continued to watch and point at something farther away in the woodland.

It was the monster, Bryan thought. It had to be. Or at least, what the monster was doing to the woodland. They in all likelihood couldn't see the monster yet, hidden by the trees as it was. Which was at least some good news. From this angle it was impossible to see where the monster was. It was clearly still there, its heavy footsteps pounding the earth like a drum.

Bryan tried to think back to how loud the monster's footsteps were when it was chasing them. The whole cave seemed to shake when it chased them before, but they were not in the caves now. It was difficult to gauge how far away the monster really was.

Bryan wished Rosetta was there. She was his right hand man. She knew what he wanted and needed before he himself did. She would have had a computer program on her laptop to input the details so it could tell them precisely how far the monster likely was. But she wasn't there. They were alone with their own supercomputers—their brains. But they had been corrupted by emotions and would likely give faulty readings.

"Remember to keep going," Bryan said. "If you fall over or twist your ankle or get out of breath, it doesn't matter. You can heal later, recover later. But you have to keep going. Okay?"

They all nodded, Zoe and Cassie hopping on the spot and doing some stretches.

"Shall we go?" Zoe said

"Yes," Bryan said.

"Now?" Cassie said.

"Yes," Bryan said. "Now."

# 17.

THEY PUT themselves in fate’s hands. They prayed the monster was looking in another direction, but from their current vantage point, it was impossible to know.

The family broke from cover, lengthening their strides by extending their arms. Bryan was out front first, but it would be Zoe before long. She was the strongest runner out of the group, followed by Bryan and Cassie—Bryan for no more reason than he was bigger and naturally muscular. But even Cassie would overtake him eventually. Aaron was the slowest. They all knew it, but they wouldn’t slow, not now.

There was a commotion on the top of the town walls, the men moving and cajoling one another. A few turned to run, hopefully to relay messages to open the gates. At this distance they wouldn’t recognize the family, wouldn’t know they weren’t part of the township, that they were strangers from another world. They would be more likely to open the gates in such a situation.

The gates weren’t being opened yet. But there was still time. They could open the gates enough for them to slip through at the last moment. But would they?

They hadn’t been followed yet. The monster hadn’t seen them. They were doing okay.

“Open the gate!” Bryan shouted.

He was sure they couldn’t hear him, but it made him feel better all the same. He waved his arms, signaling for them to pull the doors open. The men on the wall looked at each other. There was shouting. The men were doing something, and Bryan hoped to God it was something in their favor.

They were a good distance from the woodland now, and Bryan was sure they could reach the gates and enter before the monster had a chance of getting to them. They had a head start, in addition to whatever advantage they had managed to get for themselves by creeping through the woodland. Surely it would be enough.

Not necessarily.

The foliage exploded, and a giant sack of meat flew from it. The monster, out in the open, was even larger than Bryan had thought. It had thick scaly skin mottled grey, brown and green in color, seeming to shift and change as it moved beneath the sun. It was rough and craggy, with large flakes of dried skin like paper hanging off it. Its eyes were small soulless black holes, like a shark's, set beneath a thick brow, turning them into dark shadowy pits. They sucked in every ounce of bravery you might have had.

Bryan daren't spend much time looking over his shoulder. It didn't matter what the monster looked like. All that mattered was getting to the door with plenty of time to spare.

Cassie was beginning to pull away from him now. He didn't mind. Let her go first. So long as they all reached the gate before the monster, it didn't matter.

Bryan could even hear Aaron behind him, gasping and wheezing. He was impressed he managed to keep up with him. Or maybe Bryan was just slower than he thought he was.

The monster growled a low groan that bounced off the solid timber walls. It was angry, hungry, desperate to complete whatever horrific process it had begun deep in the caves on its spindle-like torture device.

A ringing bell went up from the church steeple, loud and piercing. The town was being warned the monster was out and coming at the town.

But still the gates had not opened.

"Open the gates!" Zoe shouted.

"Open the door!" Cassie screamed.

Was there a secret password? Something only the town members knew? Was this going to be the end of the family's story here, deep beneath the world?

The monster's footsteps thudded on the earth, gaining ground. Unimpeded, it was far faster than a man could run, and at greater distances to boot.

There was movement in the gate. Not the gate itself, but a doorway Bryan hadn't even noticed was there. It began to open. His heart fluttered with hope.

He pumped his arms harder, his legs finding new strength. All he had to do—all any of them had to do—was get inside the town, through the door, and they would be safe.

Zoe crossed the drawbridge first, passing through the door without stopping. Cassie was next. Bryan risked a glance over his shoulder at Aaron. He was some way behind, a dozen yards, and flailing fast, struggling to keep up.

The monster was gaining, leaning forward with its tail and head fully extended. It was going at full tilt, determined to snap up at least one tasty morsel. The ground shook like an earthquake was striking. If Aaron stumbled and fell, it would be over for him.

Bryan didn't slow, didn't stop. Aaron didn't need the distraction. He needed to focus—so did Bryan. He wasn't safe yet either. Bryan crossed the drawbridge and threw himself through the door, catching hold of its frame and using it to turn himself around so he could slam the door closed the moment Aaron was through.

Then a scream came from the other side of the door.

Bryan's heart stopped. He turned to look through the door, his heart in his mouth. Had the monster caught Aaron?

Aaron slammed into Bryan, knocking him back. He'd just been bellowing, shouting at the top of his voice to get his body to cover the final few yards to the door.

The door slammed into place, followed by all the locks. They weren't enough to keep the monster out, but then, it was unlikely to fit through the doorway in any case.

The family was through. They were safe. For now. Bryan wasn't even aware of the hundreds of staring eyes looking down at him as he ignored his own advice to Aaron and lay on his back, gasping for air.

Right then, he didn't care what the locals were like, what they wanted to do with him. He was safe. His family was safe, and that was all that mattered.

# 18.

THE LOCALS were silent for the longest time, uttering not a word. They stared at the family, who lay panting on the ground. Zoe could see the questions on their faces as clear as if they were written in ink.

They wanted to know who they were, what they were doing here, and how they had come to be chased by the monster. Zoe was perfectly happy to give them all the answers they wanted, but first she needed to get her breath back.

“Make way!” a deep voice said. “Make way for Lord Maltese!”

The locals parted like the Red Sea. Half a dozen armored men stepped from the crowd and fanned out, filling the wide space the family occupied.

Zoe’s lungs hurt. Was it normal for lungs to hurt? But it was an idle thought, and one she didn’t give much credence.

After the guards had spread out, a family emerged, standing before them. As Zoe recovered and got to her feet, she became aware of how well dressed they were, with the rich colors and hues of only the very finest materials and designs.

The guards did not put much effort into watching the locals. This was an encouraging sign. It told Zoe that if this was the ruling family, then they didn’t really fear for their safety, that the locals seemed to like them, and suggested they were in a relatively safe place.

They were a good looking family. The father, the lord, had a square jaw and mousy brown hair. He was tall, almost as tall as Bryan, and they could have almost looked into one another’s eyes. Lady Maltese was shorter than Zoe, who was herself almost as tall as Bryan. She appeared to be in good shape, though it was difficult to tell beneath the many layers she was wearing.

“You’re new here?” Lord Maltese said.

He said it to Bryan, assuming he was the leader of the family. That assumption made Zoe grit her teeth, but she didn’t say anything. These people were a world away—several, in fact—from the one they occupied on the surface. There was no reason to think they would think like a modern society.

“We are,” Bryan said.

“How did you get here?” Lord Maltese said.

“We came through a sinkhole,” Bryan said. “We’ve been here for maybe the last few hours.”

“Hours?” Lord Maltese said. “My, you are new here. And you stumbled upon the monster in those first few hours? What bad luck.”

“You’re telling me,” Bryan said.

“Yes,” Lord Maltese said with a furrowed brow. “I am.”

“We were unconscious when we got here, and we were going to be fed to the monster,” Bryan said. “Our hands and ankles were tied.”

“Oh dear,” Lord Maltese said, turning pale. “It appears there’s been a case of mistaken identity. You see, we have a ritual here. It helps keep the monster at bay. Ever since our ancestors first arrived here, burnt, scorched bodies have been appearing on the surface of Lake Rebirth. The monster needs to feed. He usually hunted for us and our citizens, and here we had a constant flow of dead bodies coming to us. The decision was made to feed those bodies to the monster, to sate his hunger.”

“We were mistaken for dead bodies?” Zoe said. “But we were clearly not dead, if someone had just checked. And we aren’t scorched.”

“Your hair says differently,” Lady Maltese said with a small smile.

Zoe’s hand unconsciously went to her burnt hair.

“We didn’t look like this when we first arrived,” Zoe said. “The monster did it to us while chasing us through the caves.”

“The dragon chased you?” Lord Maltese said. “And you escaped?”

He had a big beaming smile.

“That’s the first I’ve ever heard of that happening!” he said. “Perhaps the dragon is growing old and weak! Perhaps he is losing his touch!”

“Who was the idiot who took us to the caves in the first place?” Zoe said.

The locals turned to look at a weedy looking fellow in ill-fitting clothes at least two sizes too big for him. He lowered his gaze.

“How was I supposed to know you were all still alive?” Montgomery said. “You should have let it be known you weren’t dead.”

“Our heartbeat ought to have been enough of a clue,” Zoe said.

“Didn’t you check for their pulse?” Lady Maltese said.

Montgomery pressed his dry lips together.

“I don’t rightly recall,” he said.

“Which is another way of say, ‘No’,” Lady Maltese said.

She turned to Zoe and the others.

“We’re awfully sorry for your experience,” she said. “We’ll put safeguards in place to ensure it never happens again.”

“We’ve never seen the dragon act like this before,” Lord Maltese said. “In fact, we’ve never seen him come out from the caves much farther than a few dozen yards. So long as we continue to feed him the bodies that are spat out of hell, he remains calm and quite happy.”

“Hell?” Bryan said. “What makes you think the bodies came from hell?”

“Because of the way they look—scorched and burnt, and they come from underground, where hell is, of course,” Lord Maltese said.

“Of course,” Bryan said.

He didn’t bother to explain where the bodies really came from. Perhaps he would tell them later.

“Would you care to see the dragon from the safety of our walls?” Lord Maltese said.

“See him?” Bryan said. “What do you mean? He’s still here? He didn’t return to the caves?”

“No,” Lord Maltese said. “I rather think he still expects us to hand you over to him.”

# 19.

THE STAIRS headed up and up and up, into the sky. They had been built for feet smaller even than Aaron's. The steps were narrow, and he had to turn his feet to one side to scale them. Why they had made them like this, Aaron didn't know.

"You don't all have to come up and see the monster," Bryan had said. "I just want to see what it looks like in daylight, without it chasing after us."

"I want to see it too," Zoe said.

Aaron didn't care to see it. In fact, he wouldn't have cared to see it again for the rest of his life. He hated the thing. He would have quite happily used a large gun to kill it. But the last thing he wanted was to appear weak in front of all these people.

The climb up the stairs was the last thing the family wanted after their ordeal. Aaron was not a natural runner, and he had forced his body to do what it was not used to. He was now paying the price for his laziness on the track field back on the surface.

Sport and exercise always seemed like a waste of time to him in the modern world, but now he was down here, fighting and running for his life, it seemed the most natural thing in the world. To stay fit and in shape. He was actually in the best shape of his life right then, which wasn't saying much. He could run a few yards without instantly dying—something he could never have done before—even with the teacher shouting in his ear.

He was panting, trying to keep up with the adults. Lord Maltese walked beside Bryan, and was telling him about the town's current operations. He gave a short history of the town. Aaron couldn't hear what else he said as someone tutted beside him.

"Father always gets the dates mixed up," a sweet voice at Aaron's shoulder said.

The owner of the sweet voice was a short girl, perhaps a year younger than Aaron himself, and had her mother's look. Hers was a classical beauty, with long flowing hair in ringlets. She wore a dress that should

have only really been worn on special occasions. But she wore it well, holding up her skirts so she could more easily climb the stairs.

“The town was founded in 1654, not 1645,” the girl said with a sigh. “No matter how many times I tell him, he always gets it mixed up. I’m Abigail, by the way.”

“Aaron,” he said, shaking her hand. “You’re a student of history?”

“We’re all subjects of history,” Abigail said. “We might as well be students of it as well. It educates and informs us in ways we’re unable to understand till much later I find, which is what my tutor says is the only real knowledge in any case.”

Aaron thought over the words and wasn’t sure he completely agreed with them.

“I don’t agree with him either,” Abigail said, reading his expression. “But it’s better to let the older people have their say, even if it is factually incorrect or useless. His teachings don’t have much of an effect on our world, so who cares?”

Aaron blinked and smiled. He’d found a kindred spirit, deep beneath the earth of all places.

Behind him, struggling up the stairs, Cassie shook her head. At least Aaron was making friends. It was usually always her who made friends easily, but she supposed that was just because she was more suited to making friends up on the surface than he was.

Cassie’s legs ached more than she could recall them ever hurting. They were shaking before she even got halfway up the steps. She reached for the handrail, but her palm was sweaty, and she slipped.

She fell backward. She could see what was going to happen already. She was going to fall and hit the stairs and slide back down a good number of them, rolling backward as she did so. She was going to suffer some serious damage and likely broken bones.

She regretted going up those stairs. She knew she should have waited at the bottom. And now she was going to pay for it, potentially with her life. She had escaped pirates, giant birds, dinosaurs, and a dragon. Now she was going to be vanquished by some steps.

But, it didn’t happen.

A strong hand reached out and grabbed her by the arm. Another swooped up around the small of her back.

“Careful,” a deep voice said. “The handrail can be a little slippery at times.”

Cassie turned to her rescuer. It was a handsome face with a strong jaw and smooth cheeks. He had big blue eyes and long blond hair. He was a prince from the fairytale books.

Cassie averted her eyes. It didn’t seem right to look at something so beautiful without being at least a little bashful. She felt ashamed she looked so rough in his presence. That was the second reason she looked away: if she didn’t have to look directly at him, she didn’t have to pretend like she was there. She wasn’t there if he couldn’t see her.

“There’s nobody in town who knows more about the town’s history than my sister,” the young man said. “I sometimes think she was swapped at birth for a smarter child from someone else’s family.”

“I sometimes feel the same way about myself,” Cassie said. “Not that I’m not smart. I mean, I didn’t always fit in with my parents.”

“I suppose none of us ever really do,” the young man said. “I’m Roland.”

“Cassie,” she said, smiling bashfully.

“How about we get up these steps and look the dragon dead in the eye?” Roland said.

Suddenly Cassie couldn’t think of anything she’d rather do.

# 20.

“EVERY WORLD we come to, we seem to find somewhere going through a period of transition,” Zoe said, climbing the final few steps.

“In what way?” Lady Maltese said.

“In the first world there was a war between two peoples, an ancient ancestor of the human race, and a more modern one,” Zoe said. “In the second world, a war between the British and the pirates—don’t ask. The third world was being destroyed by its human inhabitants, something we understand only all too well on the surface. And now we’re here.”

“There is a transition taking place,” Lady Maltese said. “Though perhaps not on the scale you’re used to seeing. But we are changing. We are lucky enough to have a genius inventor here in this town. He’s developing technology that will completely change the way we live our lives. He’s working on making horseless carriages and ways to float safely from great heights and… all manner of exciting things.”

“Really?” Zoe said. “That’s amazing. I guess in a place as small as this, it only takes one person to make a big difference.”

“Yes,” Lady Maltese said. “Thankfully, for the better. What is the level of technology like on the surface?”

“Advanced,” Zoe said.

“You already have horseless carriages?” Lady Maltese said.

“Yes, for a long time now,” Zoe said.

“Has it changed the way your world operates?” Lady Maltese said.

“Oh yes, totally,” Zoe said. “Though not always for the better.”

Lady Maltese frowned.

“Perhaps you or your husband might educate us, so we might not make the same mistakes you and your ancestors did,” she said.

“We can try,” Zoe said. “But people have a way of ignoring good advice.”

“Then we will do our utmost to ensure we will listen,” Lady Maltese said with a fresh smile. “Will you help us?”

“Yes,” Zoe said. “I don’t see why not. But we’ll need your help too. There’s a way for us to escape, to leave this world and return to our

home.”

“Certainly,” Lady Maltese said. “All you need do is describe it to us.”

They were interrupted by Lord Maltese.

“Here we are,” he said.

He was standing on top of the wall. He held out his hand to help his lady wife up the final few steps. There were soldiers standing to attention with weapons, armed and ready should the monster attack.

The family approached the wall and peered over, keeping back in case they needed to leap back to safety. They didn’t have to look long to see the giant reptile standing, almost at head height with the wall.

From here they could see the rolling grassy dune fields. They were farmed, in the midst of a new crop rotation. There was something somehow modern and organized about it. But then, they would have been doing this for hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years, and they would be experts. Still, it was a higher level of sophistication than they had seen so far in the other worlds.

Flames smoldered from the monster’s blistered lips. It did not blast them with its torrent of fire, and let its eyes do the glaring for it. The soldiers clutched their spears and bow and arrows tight. Their arms shook with fear, but they did not release, primarily because they knew it would anger the beast and force it to attack them.

Judging by the look on their faces, they did not appear to have seen the beast with their own eyes before. That struck Zoe as strange. She filed the thought away for further analysis later.

“When did the dragon first appear here?” Zoe said.

“Fifteen year ago,” Lord Maltese said. “One day he wasn’t here, and then suddenly he was.”

“Why haven’t you killed it?” Bryan said.

“Have you seen it?” Lord Maltese said. “It is large and very strong. We do not have the resources or manpower to destroy something so great. If we were to attack, it would be the end of us. But thankfully, we have an inventor, a slightly eccentric figure who is developing weapons we hope will aid us in destroying the dragon. Then we can live in peace.”

Zoe looked over the side of the wall at the monster. It appeared to be looking directly at her, as if he were all it was concerned with in the whole world. It wanted her, and her family, to consume them as it had the

scorched bodies. As far as it was concerned, the family belonged to it. And it wanted them. Now.

Zoe felt a shiver go through her. How long would the town protect them if the monster attacked? Would they let their own people die before sacrificing a family they had no connection with? Zoe didn’t think so.

“Come,” Lord Maltese said. “You must be tired and hungry. You will stay with us at the castle.”

He didn’t wait for their response, and turned and began heading back down the stairs at a spritely pace. He seemed completely unaware of the look of dread on the family’s face, peering down at the near-endless stretch of stairs.

# 21.

THE ROOM Bryan and Zoe were given was a study in the classic medieval design. Expensive heavy drapes and fresh tapestries adorned the stone walls. The bed was huge, big enough for a whole family to sleep in.

Zoe pressed her hand to it to check the firmness. It was soft as a cloud. It didn't matter what it was like, in truth. After sleeping on the ground and various floors the past few weeks, any kind of cushion was welcome.

The door banged open, and a gaggle of women entered carrying heavy jugs of steaming water. They poured them into the large bath in the middle of the room, and piled various soaps and perfumes on one side. They quickly backed out of the room to leave Bryan and Zoe in peace.

"Thank you!" Zoe said.

The door was already closed.

"The service is good," Bryan said.

"If not their manners," Zoe said.

She opened the door and peered down the corridor in either direction. Suits of armor stood to attention, coats of allegiance from noble houses decorating the walls. Cassie and Aaron were in a room adjacent to their own. Zoe ducked back into their room.

"Wait a minute," Zoe said. "I wonder if…"

She got down on her knees and looked under the their bed. She smiled and reached for what she could see there. She pulled it out. It sounded ceramic.

Zoe lifted it up with a grin on her face. It was a strangely shaped object, with a lid on the top that slotted nicely into place.

"What is it?" Bryan said.

"A chamber pot," Zoe said. "Here. This one's yours."

Bryan took it, though he didn't want to. It felt like an alien object in his hands.

"A chamber pot?" he said.

"You-" Zoe said.

"Yes, yes," Bryan said. "I know what it's used for. Where's yours?"

"Under the other side of the bed, I suppose," Zoe said.

“Do you think they’re matching?” Bryan said.

Zoe smiled contentedly and looked around at their room. It wasn’t altogether different to a high class hotel they might find on the surface. Indeed, there were probably hotels and resorts that offered this style of room. She felt happy, and at the same time, exhausted and tired.

“Do you want to take the first bath, or shall I?” Zoe said.

“You can,” Bryan said. “I’m probably dirtier than you. Better for me to wash in your dirty water than vice versa.”

“So kind and considerate,” Zoe said, kissing him on the cheek.

“Besides, the water’s steaming hot,” Bryan said. “It’ll be just right for you. Just make sure to get out when it’s a little warm.”

“I think being around lords and ladies is having a positive impact on you,” Zoe said.

“Do you want me to turn my back?” Bryan said.

“Why?” Zoe said .”You’ve seen everything before.”

“Haven’t I just,” Bryan said with a cheeky wink.

“You can keep an eye on the door,” Zoe said.

“I’ll jam something under it to keep it closed,” Bryan said. “That way, I can enjoy the view.”

“Pervert,” Zoe said.

“Guilty as charged,” Bryan said.

Zoe stripped off and climbed into the hot water. She lay down and let the water soak into her bones. She let out a deep contented sigh.

“I want to stay here forever,” Zoe said.

“I want to stay looking at you forever,” Bryan said.

Zoe smiled, feeling a little self conscious, but didn’t cover herself up.

“Do you want me to scrub your back?” Bryan said.

“In a minute,” Zoe said. “Let me enjoy this for a little while.”

Bryan stood up and wandered around the room. He picked up a little rock that had been polished to a high shine. It looked expensive. He moved to the tapestries on the wall.

One depicted a town that was happy and vibrant, with trade going in and out. In the next picture, a hole appeared underneath it, and the whole town disappeared into it. The town was destroyed, the inhabitants still alive, now living in a dome-shaped world. The locals rebuilt the town, and they once again prospered. And then a monster appeared. It was big with sharp pointy teeth. It came each night, taking one, two, sometimes three people

at a time. Sometimes they were able to fight it off, but most of the time they failed. So they fed it dead bodies that washed up on the lake, and the town was once again at peace.

Bryan wondered what the next few images would look like. He suspected it would be of a dead dragon and a heroic figure standing over it —perhaps even Lord Maltese.

Zoe began to scrub at her skin, working hard to remove the dirt, grime and sand. She had to wash her hair three times before it began to feel like real hair.

“Okay,” Zoe said. “I’m ready to be scrubbed.”

Bryan scrubbed her back with a natural loofah.

“Careful!” Zoe said. “I’d still like to keep some of the skin if you can manage it.”

“I can’t help it,” Bryan said. “The dirt is really caked on here.”

“Just… try to take it easy,” Zoe said.

Zoe’s skin was red raw by the time Bryan was finished, but it was clean and felt like new. He dreaded to think what his own back was going to look like after he’d finished washing.

“I’m done,” Zoe said. “But the water’s cold and filthy. I’ll ring and get more hot water brought up.”

“Ring?” Bryan said.

Zoe climbed out of the bath, water spilling over the floor. She wrapped a thick towel around herself and crossed to a series of bells that hung above the door. They each had something written underneath them. Zoe studied them before pulling on the string attached to one of them.

“It’ll be up here in a minute,” Zoe said.

Ten minutes in the place, and Zoe could have been born there. Bryan supposed it was due to her classical history education. She was living in history now. It was like traveling back in time, only without the discomfort of wondering whether you’d be able to return to your own timeline. The world still existed and carried on perfectly well without them. They just needed to get back to it.

Zoe’s mouth dropped open at the color of her bath water.

“That was from me?” she said. “I’m surprised I was able to walk under all that extra weight.”

“You have lost a lot of weight,” Bryan said. “I guess the mud only made up the difference.”

Zoe pressed her lips together. It was a gesture Bryan loved, and he felt himself begin to stir. He stood up. Zoe would have recognized the look in his eye anywhere.

“Oh no,” Zoe said. “You stay away from me, you filthy beast. Get clean. Then we’ll see.”

“See?” Bryan said. “I want to do a lot more than see…”

The door burst open, and the mother hens came into the room carrying jugs of steaming water. They reached down and pulled a plug from under the bath, spilling the water into a tray on wheels. The dirty water spilled into it.

The women dragged the tray out into the hall and replaced it with another, clean one. They washed the inside of the dirty tub and wiped it down so it was as good as new. Then they tipped the hot water into it. They worked with the efficiency of an F1 pit team.

“Is there anything else, my lady?” one of the women said.

“Lady?” Zoe said. “Uh, no. Thank you.”

The mother hen followed the other women out into the hall and shut the door behind them.

Bryan and Zoe stood there a moment, stock still, minds still processing what had just happened.

“Did you just see a team of old ladies come in and replace a bathtub full of water in ten seconds flat?” Bryan said.

“I did,” Zoe said.

Bryan approached the tub, surprised to find it perfectly clean.

“They replaced the soap!” he said. “I didn’t even see them bring any new soap in here!”

“They’re efficient,” Zoe said.

“I’ll say,” Bryan said. “I’ve never seen such efficiency on the surface. Even in the best hotels in the world. No, *especially* not in the so-called best hotels.”

“You stay at those hotels for the prestige, not the service,” Zoe said.

“Don’t remind me,” Bryan said. “In some ways the world has gone backwards. We’ve advanced in technology and sophistication, but sometimes I think we paid too high a price.”

“I think you’re right,” Zoe said. “Sometimes we care more about the things we own more than the people who make them for us.”

Zoe opened a wardrobe. Dresses and smart male wear circa the 1700s hung from hangers.

“This stuff is in our size,” Zoe said. “How do you suppose they knew our sizes?”

“Beats me,” Bryan said, stripping off. “Maybe we match the average size of the 1700s person.”

“Maybe,” Zoe said with a frown.

She flicked through the items one at a time until she came to a long burgundy dress. She unhooked it and draped it over one arm. She felt the material between her fingers. It was smooth and silky. She laid it on the bed and admired it. It was a beautiful item. If she’d lost the amount of weight she thought she had, it would fit her just right.

Bryan eased himself into the water, his face scrunched up. It was too hot, so he stood up and put more cold water into the bath. The steam bellowed and turned his area of the room into a sauna. He sighed as he lowered himself back into the tub.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” Zoe said.

“Wonderful,” Bryan said.

He lay back and relaxed, closing his eyes. He didn’t relax as long as Zoe had, but then, she didn’t expect him to. Bryan was a man of action. Yoga for him was about the stretches. He had no time for the spiritual mumbo jumbo.

“I’ve been thinking,” Bryan said.

“Here comes trouble,” Zoe said.

“It seems like we’ve been passing through time as we move through these worlds, don’t you think?” Bryan said. “It’s like seeing the development of man, how we emerged and looked out at the world and finally managed to get control of our surroundings.”

“You might be onto something there,” Zoe said.

Relieved he didn’t sound stupid, Bryan pushed on.

“First there were the cavemen, the early humans,” he said. “And then there were the seafaring people, and then the miners. And then these people. They look more advanced than anyone else we’ve come across so far.”

“But still a long way off the surface,” Zoe said.

“Maybe these sinkholes only open for a short period of time before closing,” Bryan said. “And then new ones open up, each time getting

closer and closer to the surface time."

"So you're saying we're getting closer to home?" Zoe said.

"I don't know," Bryan said. "But it makes sense in a warped kind of way."

"It does," Zoe said. "But just because we're moving forward in time doesn't mean we're necessarily getting closer to the surface."

"No," Bryan said, slightly deflated. "I suppose not."

"I haven't noticed anything about the rocks and the walls of the worlds we've been to that suggests we've been moving up nor down," Zoe said.

"Thanks," Bryan said. "That really makes me feel better."

"It's not about feeling better," Zoe said. "It's about the facts. When we get back to the surface, everything we know about deep under the Earth's surface is going to change. All the textbooks will need to be rewritten. Nations will begin digging to discover these new worlds, and these new resources."

"Yeah," Bryan said.

And suddenly he didn't sound so excited by the prospect.

"But not necessarily," Zoe said.

"What do you mean?" Bryan said. "How will we explain to everyone where we've been if we don't tell them about these worlds down here?"

"There are a million different reasons we can use to explain where we've been," Zoe said.

"You mean, lie?" Bryan said. "What would we say?"

"Anything," Zoe said with a shrug. "No one would know. Anyway, we don't need to worry about that right now. We need to focus on getting to the position where we'll use those stories we'll make up."

Zoe moved to the makeup table and began experimenting with the items she found there.

"I suppose you're right," Bryan said. "I vote we were on an undercover mission for the CIA."

"Something believable," Zoe said.

"I always fancied myself in the CIA," Bryan said.

He picked up a scrubbing brush and began rubbing at his skin. He had to dunk the sponge under the surface with every couple of scrubs. Then he paused.

"Why would anyone want to protect the machines?" he said.

"Sorry?" Zoe said.

“The machines in the cave,” Bryan said. “They’ve been playing on my mind. Why would someone want to put them there?”

“I don’t know,” Zoe said. “Maybe they weren’t being hidden there at all, but protected.”

“Protected by what?” Bryan said.

“By the most vicious guard dog in history,” Zoe said. “A dragon.”

Bryan stopped scrubbing himself and turned to look at Zoe.

“You don’t honestly think that’s what’s happening there, do you?” he said. “That someone is using that monster to protect something?”

“Why not?” Zoe said. “No one here will go anywhere near the caves. It’s where I’d put something if I wanted to make sure no one ever discovered it.”

Bryan returned to scrubbing himself.

“You wouldn’t be able to discover it either though, would you?” he said. “It’s all very well putting it in there in the first place, but how would you go about getting it back out again?”

“You’d have a secret entrance, I suppose,” Zoe said.

“I didn’t see any secret entrance,” Bryan said.

“That would defeat the point of it being secret now, wouldn’t it?” Zoe said.

“I suppose so,” Bryan said.

Bryan peeled something sticky off his arm. It had dried and looked like a flake of skin.

“But why would you want the machines here anyway?” Zoe said. “There’s not much water. Where would you use them?”

“Maybe they’re only here for a while,” Bryan said, scrubbing the soles of his feet. “You’d move them on to their final destination later.”

“But why keep them here?” Zoe said.

“Beats me,” Bryan said. “Maybe there isn’t a safer place between here and wherever they’re going.”

“That’s certainly true of the last world,” Zoe said. “God help whoever is there right now.”

“God help us,” Bryan said. “Never mind anyone else. We’ve got a dragon to face.”

“It’s not a dragon,” Zoe said. “There aren’t such things as dragons.”

“No,” Bryan said. “But there are such things that could be mistaken for a dragon. Like things we’ve already seen.”

Zoe’s hand froze in the middle of applying makeup to her lips.

“Like a dinosaur?” she said. “Funny. The same thing crossed my mind too. If you took away the monster’s ability to breathe fire, you could easily mistake it for a T-Rex. But how could one of those have gotten here?”

“Who knows how things work here,” Bryan said. “One might have gotten stuck here by accident, or discovered a tunnel and ended up here.”

“Seems a bit unlikely, don’t you think?” Zoe said. “If our idea of the worlds moving forward has any credence to it, it means there were dragons around during the seventeenth century.”

“There are plenty of stories about them,” Bryan said. “George and the last dragon for example.”

“Hardly concrete evidence,” Zoe said.

“You never know how much truth might be contained in old stories,” Bryan said.

“I’ll believe them if we found bones in the fossil record around that time,” Zoe said.

“Your scientific snobbishness is shining through,” Bryan said.

“It’s called evidence and intelligence,” Zoe said. “I don’t believe things just because it sounds nice. But I guess this whole place is unlikely. Why should the creatures here be any different?”

“What about the fire we saw it breathe?” Bryan said. “Where did that come from?”

“You saw it outside the town walls in pure daylight,” Zoe said. “It had some kind of machinery attached to it, something big and heavy strapped to its back. It looked half robot to me. Who knows what its purpose is. But these locals are living in the middle ages. They wouldn’t know the difference between modern science and magic. But we do. It was a machine, and someone put it on a dinosaur.”

“Someone, who?” Bryan said.

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” Zoe said.

They shared a look.

“This is getting spooky,” Bryan said.

Zoe didn’t like to admit it, but this whole world had her spooked ever since they had arrived.

# 22.

THE DINING HALL was a feast for the senses. A string quartet played harmonious music, soft soothing melodies. The table was mahogany, polished to a high shine. Expensive chandeliers dangled from the ceiling, giving the room a healthy glow. The food looked like something from an Ideal Homes catalogue.

Zoe couldn't think of a time when the family had looked so good either. None of them had taken a nap after their recent ordeal. It seemed their period of being unconscious had fully restored them. Besides, the fright they experienced of a monster chasing them was becoming a regular part of their lives. Like anything that became routine, it had less of an effect on them the more they experienced it.

The sun's rays were still visible through the windows. The lighting wasn't necessary yet. Clearly the night's events were expected to carry on late into the evening, long after the sun had set.

But the family had to earn their meal. The hall was crammed with townspeople. They stood between the family and the dining table at the front of the hall. The family had to shake them each by the hand and introduce themselves. It was good they all spoke English, though you could hardly guess it, what with their strong accents.

It was difficult to understand some of them. It was somewhat overwhelming for the family, especially Zoe and Aaron, who were not often at such high class events. Bryan, for his sins, was more experienced. Cassie carried herself with the dignity of her father. They mingled and answered questions to anything posed to them.

The first round consisted of the affluent townspeople, the nobles. They were apparently enchanted with the family, and found their broad American accents a novelty. *Strange,* Cassie thought. *Usually it's the other way round.*

At the head of the main hall were the lord and lady. They oversaw the event with mild interest, but didn't get involved in the proceedings. Abigail and Roland appeared to be bored by the event, staring off into space and blowing out through their mouths.

Abigail had something of interest in her lap, cleverly concealed within the folds of her dress. Roland had not prepared himself, and so spent most of his time eying up the local girls, most notably, perhaps because she was something new to look at, Cassie.

She looked different to the other girls. She had a feistiness, an aggressiveness in her character that came through in her persona. She was a firecracker, something that would keep Roland on his toes. He found her alluring, exciting. Something different to the normally coy and shy ladies in court.

He was pleased when Cassie occasionally glanced in his direction, her eyes catching his, before looking away. It excited him to see that. It wasn't that she was shy about looking him in the eye—far from it, clearly—but she did not want to be seen as a girl who did look a boy in the eye, despite what her true character might be.

But it wasn't just the rich and high blood present in the great hall. The whole town had turned out for the event. The roiling masses, unused to such ceremonies, stayed predominantly at the back of the hall. They looked apprehensive as the family approached, shuffling their feet and not liking to ask too many questions.

The more boisterous youth had no such reservations, and asked questions, though they were not always the most searching or introspective —mostly things about how they dress on the surface, or what the women were like. The family gave direct, but not particularly informative, answers. The rowdy young men soon got bored and moved away.

The family were starving by the time they got to their seats at the head table, on either side of the lord's family. The family felt self conscious with the arrangement. They were not used to being the center of attention. They concentrated on eating quietly. That seemed to please the lord and lady both.

There was one member of the main table who was not part of the two families. He had a scruffy beard and didn't speak often. When he did, it was in a low mumble that caused the listener to have to lean forward to hear what he was saying. He almost always ended up repeating what he was saying for this reason, the first words on his conversation partner's lips being, 'Excuse me?' It was hard to believe that so much of the town's future rested upon his narrow shoulders. He was the inventor. His name was Jeffrey.

He was inventing things only the family from the surface could begin to understand the purpose of. It was hard to imagine this little man hard at work in his workshop, knocking these things together. He didn't seem all there to Bryan, his marbles scattered across the floor of his mind.

A minstrel took to the stage and began to sing.

*There was a man,*
*A very strange enchanted man,*
*His cowl was black, his face pale as snow,*
*And he walked with a limp and had a glow,*
*He promised us jewels as far as the eye could see,*
*Instead he gave us nothing, and all he took from me,*
*A promise he made, to us all,*
*And he transformed into the beast we all hate and adore.*

There was more, but it was lost to conversation at the head table.

"We've found suitable accommodation in the town for you all to reside in," Lord Maltese said to the family. "It's a cute little cottage on the outskirts of town. It was previously occupied by the good inventor here, but we've since relocated him to the castle. He's able to focus on his inventions without interruption. Your house is close to the market and water well. It is fully equipped, though you might find you'll have to buy a few things if required. Feel free to charge them to the castle.

"My lady wife mentioned you are from the surface and have some experience of engineering. It would perhaps serve you, and us, if you were to aid our inventor with his various contraptions."

"Sure," Bryan said.

The lord spoke with a booming voice that reached the back of the hall, so even the poor could hear their conversation. This was a show, one Bryan and his family needed to take part in.

"That will be fine until we find our way out of here," Bryan said.

"Out?" Lord Maltese said. "But there is no way out."

"There is always a way out," Bryan said. "It's just a matter of finding it."

"We have spent centuries looking for a way out and never found one," Lord Maltese said. "I can assure you, if there was a way out, we would have found it by now."

"We've been in several worlds so far," Bryan said. "In each one we were able to find the Passage. I'm confident that with enough time, we will find

one here too."

Silence, save for the etchings of knives and forks on plates. Lady Maltese placed a hand on the lord's arm. His shoulders visibly relaxed. He smiled at his wife, who nodded back to him, before resuming eating.

"Of course," Lord Maltese said. "We will make every effort to find this Passage of yours."

"Thank you," Bryan said. "I don't want to be any trouble."

"It's no trouble," Lord Maltese said. "I got word this afternoon the dragon has returned to his cave. I doubt we'll be seeing much of him any longer."

"That's all very well," a voice from the back of the hall said, "but what about…?"

His voice was lost to distance.

"Excuse me?" Lord Maltese said. "Who spoke?"

Silence answered him.

"Don't be afraid," Lord Maltese said. "That's what this feast is for—for everyone to voice their concerns, ask questions and get helpful feedback. You will not be punished for expressing yourselves."

A man far down at the opposite end of the hall stood up. A thousand pairs of eyes turned to him. He removed his hat, but he did not quail.

The lord squinted in an effort to identify the speaker.

"Jones?" he said. "Is that you?"

"It is, my lord," Jones said.

"Jones is one of our finest cobblers," Lord Maltese said as an aside to the family. "He fixes shoes to the very highest standard. Without him, we would all be walking barefoot. Speak up, Mr. Jones. Everyone here wishes to hear what you have to say, no one moreso than I."

"That's very gracious of you, my lord," Mr. Jones said. "We all greatly respect you and your lady wife, of course. And we are all excited about the new developments we've got coming our way thanks to the inventor. But it seems this family arrived at a peculiar time."

"How do you mean?" Lord Maltese said.

"Well, it's the fact that with all these developments happening, it's about time something came along and threw a spanner in the works," Mr. Jones said.

"I can assure you, the family's arrival has nothing to do with the developments we're making," Lord Maltese said. "In fact, with their

unique knowledge of the technology from the surface, we could well expect development speed to increase, not slow down. Does that answer your concerns, Mr. Jones?”

Mr. Jones nodded and performed a slight bow.

“It does, my lord,” he said.

“Excellent,” Lord Maltese said. “Please sit down, Mr. Jones. You must be hungry. Does anyone else have a concern they’d like to voice?”

There was a pause, and then a young woman in her thirties stood up. She was closer to the top of the hall so it was easier for the lord to identify her.

“Cynthia Morris,” Lord Maltese said. “What issue do you have?”

“I’m concerned about the dragon,” Cynthia said, her voice clear and easy to hear.

“We’re all concerned with the dragon,” Lady Maltese said. “We have been living with it for years, but with any luck, with the inventor’s help, we might finally overcome it.”

“That’s not my meaning, m’lord,” Cynthia said. “It’s the effect these people have had on it that troubles me. You see, it’s true the monster used to come out of its lair every so often to feed on the innocent of the town, but that stopped when we started feeding it them bodies that come up out of Lake Rebirth. And the dragon didn’t come nowhere near us after that. Why would it? It don’t need to eat us no more.

“And then this family arrives, and the dragon comes out of its cave, chasing them, and they bring it right here. To our doorstep. Begging your pardon my lord, but why are we letting them stay here when it’s them the dragon wants? Why are we risking our lives, and the lives of our children, when it has nothing to do with us, none of our affair?”

“Yeah!” a few of the locals said, clapping.

It was a perfectly reasonable thing to be concerned about, Bryan thought.

The lord opened his mouth to speak, but this time Lady Maltese rose to her feet.

“Who among you here would not demand entry if you and your family were running for your lives?” she said. “If we lack the courage to protect each other, including the lives of strangers, well that’s too much of a sacrifice to make. It would mean our very humanity would be forsaken and there would be nothing more for us to do but turn up our toes and say

we've had enough, and we're no longer men and women. Then we can crawl back into the swamp where we belong and let the good lord take us, for we will no longer be human.

"You say you respect my husband and I. I ask for you to extend that respect to our guests, as well as to one another. We are one and the same, all here trying to do the best for ourselves and our families."

She retook her seat. The applause was slow in coming, but once it started, it caught like a spark to a clutch of dry grass, and soon the whole room was alive with cheering and whistling. Even Cynthia clapped at the impassioned and well-argued riposte.

"Well spoken my dear," Lord Maltese said with a half smile at his wife, who nodded back respectfully. "As I've always said, if anyone thinks he—or she—could do a better job than me as lord, then he—or she—need only step forward and say so.

"They will be given all my powers and duties. They will be allowed to assume my role immediately. The opportunity shall always be available to you all. Please let that person stand and present themselves."

No one moved.

"We all perform our duties here," Lord Maltese said. "No one job is more or less important than another. Each needs to be carried out, and carried out to the best of his—or her—ability. Anyone can try any job he so wishes, so long as he can find someone to take his place. Are there anymore issues people would like to share?"

# 23.

BRYAN AND ZOE entered their room and shut the door behind them.

“Well,” Zoe said. “That was an unexpected evening.”

“Nothing like being blamed for the monster attacking the town to know you feel wanted,” Bryan said.

“It did all feel a bit strange, didn’t it?” Zoe said.

“A bit?” Bryan said. “I thought for a minute they were going to lynch us! What do you think the average IQ among these folks is? Ten?”

“They haven’t been exposed to the same kind of education we have,” Zoe said.

“You can say that again,” Bryan said. “How did we ever manage to develop past this? Believing in angels and demons and hocus pocus. I’m surprised we managed to develop anything as advanced as a toothbrush with this much mistrust and superstition.”

“It’s incredible, isn’t it?” Zoe said. “But without them, we would never have become who we are today.”

“I always thought that if we were to bring these people to the surface they would eventually get used to it,” Bryan said. “That they could assume normal, regular lives. But you know what? I don’t think they could. I think they’d end up turning into psychopaths.”

“It would take them twenty years to learn how everything worked,” Zoe said. “And what kind of work would they do? Land work, labor. But their children could make the transition. We essentially all have the same hardware.”

“Doesn’t always seem that way though, does it?” Bryan said.

“But it’s true,” Zoe said. “We’re essentially the same. There’s no reason why their children couldn’t become a doctor or a lawyer or a teacher or businessman on the surface.”

“So long as they leave all this nonsense behind,” Bryan said, shaking his head. “The human mind is capable of many incredible things, and yet it’s also capable of so much stupidity.”

“That’s the way we’re made, I’m afraid,” Zoe said. “We’re still that ape swinging from the trees scratching out a living and trying to survive.”

“Looking at these people, I can believe it,” Bryan said. “I’m not sure if anyone here could survive on the surface.”

“I’m not sure,” Zoe said. “The lord might be able to, though he’d find it difficult adapting to modern living, what with shopping at the local supermarket or going to work in a dead end office job.”

“Lady Maltese might be okay,” Bryan said. “But for the same reasons as the lord, she might find it difficult. The workers would probably find it easier to adapt, funnily enough. They would be used to the daily slog, used to going to work for a living.”

“What about the inventor?” Zoe said. “Could he survive?”

“He’d find it the most easy of all, once he got used to everything on the surface,” Bryan said. “Creative minds are always in demand. And if he could come up with a novel solution to a particular problem we have, or a product everyone would want, he’d be set for life. And he works from inside a room. The inside of a room looks the same anywhere.”

“You certainly are angry today,” Zoe said.

“Not angry,” Bryan said. “Just disappointed. With all our gifts, we’re still at the bottom of the doldrums, scraping out our survival. That’s all we’re doing, all we’re ever likely to do. Struggle.”

Struggle. The keyword to everything the family had been through since they arrived in this place. Zoe was sure there was going to be a bit more struggle before they returned to the surface—*if* they could return.

# 24.

THE FAMILY slept like the dead. They fell asleep the moment they pulled the covers over themselves. Nothing could wake them, which was just as well, because nothing did.

They slept through what remained of the night, all morning, and then into early afternoon. By the time they awoke, the sun was high in the sky and the birds were singing.

They got up, washed and dressed. Cassie and Aaron were knocking at Bryan and Zoe's door before they were completely ready to receive them. Bryan opened the door and let them in. Aaron fell on the bed, Cassie into a box chair.

"What are we going to do today?" Cassie said.

"The same thing we do in every world we come to," Zoe said. "We're going to go looking for the Passage out of here."

"It's not so bad here, is it?" Cassie said, tracing her finger around the edge of a coffee table. "Compared to the other places we've been, I mean."

"No," Zoe said. "I suppose not. Why do you say that?"

"Because if we couldn't find the Passage in this world, it wouldn't be the end of the world," Cassie said. "Living here wouldn't be so bad. Who knows what the next world might be like. I mean, look at the last one."

Zoe paused in brushing her hair.

"We're going to get out of here, Cassie," she said. "We're going to find the Passage and we're going home."

"But we might not find our way out of here," Aaron said. "Dad didn't, so why should we?"

Zoe turned back to the mirror and combed the same spot of her head for five minutes. She still looked distracted, a million miles away.

"Father was killed down here," Aaron said. "You've seen how many dangers there are. And we've got each other. Dad would have been alone. And he wasn't in the past two worlds, so far as we can tell. So there's no reason to suspect he got much farther than the pirate world."

Zoe nodded, but she clearly didn't believe that. Her former husband had been an explorer, an adventurer. He wouldn't have let a little life

threatening danger get in his way. But Aaron was right they hadn't heard word of him in the past two worlds. But then, those worlds were huge. Just as there was no reason to think he had gotten through them, there was no reason to think he hadn't gotten out somehow.

But the question remained: if Aaron's father had managed to get out, why hadn't he come to find Aaron and Zoe on the surface? He would have. That was the problem with the idea of him getting out.

"At least you know your father was once here, or in these worlds," Cassie said. "My mother just disappeared one day, never to be seen again."

"None of this helps us find the Passage out of here," Bryan said. "Come on. Up on your feet. If I know our hosts, I'd say we have a very nice breakfast ready and waiting for us."

The family left the room and headed downstairs to the main hall. They were greeted by friendly staff, who looked like they'd been waiting for a rather long time. They snapped to attention from their bored lounging positions when the family presented themselves.

The staff showed the family to their seats at the head table. The tables from the feast of the previous night had all been cleared away. The floors had been scrubbed clean. Clearly it wasn't just the baths that were well maintained. Lady Maltese ran a tight ship.

"I'm sorry we're late," Bryan said. "We were more tired than we thought."

Their server, a tall thin morose looking man, only smiled and gestured to their seats.

"It is of no concern," he said. "Breakfast is served whenever you are ready, sir."

He looked up, and plates of food were brought over and deposited in the middle of the table. There was meat from the feast, cold cuts that looked just as delicious as they had the previous night. There was mead and ale to drink, but none of the family touched it.

"Do you have any hot drinks?" Zoe said.

"Mulled wine, perhaps?" the server said.

"Coffee, or tea perhaps?" Zoe said.

"Certainly," the server said. "We have both. Would you prefer to have them after your meal?"

"Customary?" Zoe said. "No, we'll have them now, if that's okay."

“Of course,” the server said, though he looked a little confused. “What would you like?”

The whole family wanted coffee. The server headed away to whisper in someone’s ear. Within twenty minutes their coffee was brought to them. It was clearly freshly made, the aroma strong.

While they waited, the family tucked into the food. There were eggs and ham and bread—some of the best bread Zoe had had in years. It was fresh, still warm. Either they made their own here—most likely—or it had been brought over from a bakery in town. They all ate heartily and well. There was little left on their plates by the time they were done.

“Would you care for cakes and pastries?” the server said.

Bryan put a hand to his stomach.

“I couldn’t eat another bite,” he said.

“I’ll take some,” Cassie said. “If there’s one thing I’ve learnt during this whole experience it’s that you should never turn away food if it’s offered.”

“I’ll take some too,” Zoe said.

Everyone filled their pockets with lemon cakes before they set off outside. They were met by a man holding the reins to a fine specimen of a horse. It was black and sleek, its hair shining. A man was bent over, checking the horse’s shoes. When he straightened up, Bryan realized it was the lord.

“Ah,” Lord Maltese said. “I see you’re up.”

“Yes,” Bryan said. “Apologies. We overslept.”

“No matter,” Lord Maltese said. “Yesterday was clearly a tough day for you.”

“Extremely,” Bryan said. “But we’re watered and fed now and ready for action.”

“Glad to hear it,” Lord Maltese said.

He turned to the stableman holding his horse’s reins.

“Bring the others around,” Lord Maltese said. “We’ll begin our search for the Passage.”

The stablemaster left with the horse and returned ten minutes later with a stable boy and three more horses.

“I thought we could split up,” Lord Maltese said. “We’ll cover more ground that way.”

“Any sign of the monster?” Bryan said.

He still couldn’t bring himself to call it a dragon.

“None,” Lord Maltese said. “I have men stationed to inform us of the dragon’s appearance, should he come from his cave again. On horseback, that should give us more than enough time to return to town.”

“Excellent,” Bryan said.

“I’d like for the kids to stay inside the town walls for now,” Zoe said. “Just until we know it’s safe outside.”

“Certainly,” Lord Maltese said. “There are many places to search within town. My son and daughter will escort your children. My wife and I shall escort you.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Zoe said. “But you don’t need to put yourselves to any trouble for our benefit.”

“It’s no trouble,” Lady Maltese said, descending down the steps. “It’s been awhile since I was outside the town walls in any case. It’ll be good to get some fresh air.”

“You be careful,” Lord Maltese said, putting a hand to his wife’s cheek.

Lady Maltese closed her eyes and pressed her hand to his, looking back into his eyes. It was an intimate moment, at odds with the social situation. The others felt mildly embarrassed at the public display of affection. The staff appeared to feel the same, and turned to look away, waiting until it had passed. Abigail and Roland paused as they descended the steps and curled up their faces, disgusted as all kids were.

The lord planted a small kiss on Lady Maltese’s lips. They stayed like that for several seconds before the lord pulled away. Lady Maltese had a look on her face like someone in total bliss. Once they parted, they smiled at one another for a little while before turning away and mounting their horses.

Zoe supposed that was what real love was, or at least the Hollywood version of it. But she knew there were many different types of love, as many as there were people. Some were overt in their affections, others less so. But it was still the same love, an intense tightening in the chest that swelled and made the partners look crazy.

Bryan turned to Zoe.

“If you’re expecting the same from me…” he said.

Zoe grinned.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” she said.

It was too soppy for her liking. She liked romance, but this to her was shameless showing off. They were kind hosts, and that was all that really mattered.

Bryan climbed onto his horse. He wasn't a bad rider, but he lacked the effortlessness of the lord and lady. Zoe was a better rider than him too. He had no idea.

Bryan turned to the kids, who were still on foot.

"Will you kids be all right?" he said.

Cassie turned to look at her host—the young and incredibly handsome young lord Roland.

"I'll be fine," she said.

Bryan pursed his lips.

"Make sure that you are," he said.

"I'll be fine too," Aaron said, beaming a smile at the young lady Abigail.

The two were off, heading in the same direction together with a small retinue of guards at their heels. They were talking and laughing before they even turned a corner and disappeared. It was so easy for some people to get along with others. Easier the younger you were, Bryan supposed. He waved to Zoe as he was led one way, Zoe in another.

The lord took Bryan, flanked on either side by half a dozen armored guards, through the castle's main entrance and out into the street.

"I thought we would begin today with the farms," Lord Maltese said. "There's a lot of land there, and the farmers will show us every inch of their farmland. How big are these Passages you spoke of?"

"Usually quite large," Bryan said. "About the size of a doorway, but they can vary in shape and size and color. We found one that was a quicksand pit, another that was a whirlpool."

The lord looked at Bryan askance. Clearly he had no idea what those things were. It was strange, but to be expected, Bryan thought. Each world would only know about those things that directly affected them and their own worlds. If an alien came down to Earth and tried to describe some hitherto unknown object, Bryan was certain he would have reacted the same way.

"I must apologize for the peasants last night," Lord Maltese said. "I try my best to educate them, but there is only so much a mind dependent on superstition and religion can take in. It's hard for them to realize the

importance of science and development, of the beauty and significance of rational explanations."

"You don't need to apologize," Bryan said. "We have plenty of people like your peasants on the surface. Forgive me for saying this, but you don't speak like them. Like the other townspeople."

"That's because I'm not one," Lord Maltese said. "Not any longer, in any case."

"You don't think like them either," Bryan said.

"That's thanks to my wonderful wife," Lord Maltese said. "She reads a lot, and opened my eyes to the world of literature and philosophy. She's a remarkable woman, my wife."

"How did you meet?" Bryan said.

"She is a lady of one of the most respected families in Silene," Lord Maltese said with more than a hint of pride. "It's amazing the heights one can climb if they but have the determination and resources. I feel sorry for the former lords who didn't have a good wife waiting for him at home.

"My lady is my guiding star, my rock. I can understand why men stray, women too. Or why they drink or gamble, or partake in a million other distractions. They needed support, an anchor, at home. But they didn't have it. I'm not condoning what they did, but I do understand it."

The road opened up as they approached the main gate—the entrance the family had passed through the day before. The guards on duty saluted the lord as his retinue passed. The land beyond the town was not flat, but rolled over voluptuous dunes, the landscape breathtaking and beautiful.

"May I ask you a personal question?" Lord Maltese said.

"Sure," Bryan said.

"Aaron, he doesn't have your look about him," Lord Maltese said. "And Zoe doesn't seem the type to play around…"

"You're asking if he's mine?" Bryan said.

"Yes," Lord Maltese said. "Sorry. That sounds very rude, doesn't it? Cassie has your look. She could even pass for Zoe's child too. I don't know."

"No," Bryan said. "Aaron isn't mine. Not biologically. Maybe he will be mine one day. He's from Zoe's previous marriage. Cassie is from my own prior relationship."

"I see," Lord Maltese said. "And you have come together to make one new family?"

“We’re trying to,” Bryan said. “But the kids have been putting up some resistance to it.”

“It must be difficult,” Lord Maltese said. “Are such couplings common on the surface?”

“Fairly common,” Bryan said.

The lord nodded.

“It will be the same here too in years to come, I suspect,” he said. “Women already demand divorces from their husbands, because their husbands do not treat them with the respect they deserve.”

“The world is always full of change,” Bryan said.

“Much of this town was brought down here with us when we first came down here,” Lord Maltese said. “We’ve added to it over the years, but the original town is very much in evidence.”

“It must have been a large sinkhole to bring the whole town down here,” Zoe said.

“Huge,” Lord Maltese said. “Our ancestors believed we were being swallowed by the Earth, that we were dead and gone. No doubt there were tales of our disappearance, of a town disappearing from the surface.”

“Probably,” Bryan said.

“You don’t know?” Lord Maltese said with a frown. “I would have thought it would have been commonplace.”

“No,” Bryan said. “But then, I don’t live in the old country.”

“The old country?” Lord Maltese said. “Britain is no longer the leader of the world?”

“I’m afraid not,” Bryan said. “America is the leader of the world now. It has been for the past hundred years or so.”

“America?” Lord Maltese said, frown deepening. “But it’s hardly any age.”

“It developed very quickly,” Bryan said. “At first borrowing from the old world, and then forging its own way.”

“I see there’s a great deal of change on the surface,” Lord Maltese said.

“There is less change down here in comparison simply because the population isn’t as large,” Bryan said. “There will be fewer instigators and motivators, fewer people to force change. It’s actually a small number of people who contribute to developing the world and making it a better place to live in.”

“What about the rest?” Lord Maltese said. “They’re mindless drones?”

“No,” Bryan said. “They provide services we need every day. Most people do. There are very few innovators in the world. They might make the world a better place to live in, but the rest of us make the world a place worth living in in the first place. Everyone is important. We all play a vital role wherever we are.”

“I couldn’t have put it better myself,” Lord Maltese said.

Bryan was beginning to like this lord. Perhaps with a little help from Bryan and his engineering background, he might make a real change to this world. A change, finally, for the better.

# 25.

“I THOUGHT we could take a trip out to the mill today,” Lady Maltese said. “As you plan on searching everywhere, you might as well begin there.”

“Has the mill been there long?” Zoe said.

“As long as the town has been,” Lady Maltese said. “We’ve had to repair and rebuild it more times than we care to count. It requires uninterrupted wind, and the walls around our town are too high. The dragon seems to like using the mill as a chew toy. But we need our flour, so we keep on rebuilding it. That’s one of the things our inventor is working on, a kind of security device that will keep the dragon away if he gets too close.”

“He’s an extraordinary man,” Zoe said.

“The finest man,” Lady Maltese said. “There’s nothing he can’t come up with when he puts his mind to it.”

“A man like him doesn’t come along often,” Zoe said. “You should make sure to utilize him as much as possible—without wearing him out, of course. He could make a real difference here.”

“He already has made a difference,” Lady Maltese said. “He’s increased food production by thirty percent, and we’re looking at making even more next year. He’s also come up with a water filtration system, which will cut down on the number of illnesses the townspeople catch. And those are just two of his inventions. Every week he comes up with more.”

“Has he always been able to come up with inventions like that?” Zoe said.

“He has, but he’s producing them at a more prodigious rate now,” Lady Maltese said.

“Is there a reason for that?” Zoe said.

“He said he just woke up one day and could do these amazing things,” Lady Maltese said. “I don’t understand half of what he talks about, but whatever he touches, turns to gold.”

The mill was a large construction, its giant sails moving in lazy circles in the breeze. It was a gorgeous sight. Zoe dismounted from her horse and

could smell the gritty flour being ground up. All thought of the Passage went out the window, disappearing with that smell.

“Wonderful, isn’t it?” Lady Maltese said. “It’s one of my all-time favorite places.”

They entered through a short door that Zoe had to duck her head down to fit through. A large woman with flabby chins greeted them.

“Hello,” she said with an unpractised bow. “My ladies. I’ve been expecting you. Where would you like to start?”

“Where would you suggest?” Zoe said.

They were taken on a tour of the building, starting from the bottom, and then working their way to the top. The large woman was very hospitable, giving Zoe items to taste test, and really knew her profession. Zoe could see there were no secret doors, no hidden passageways. No way the Passage was there.

They moved to the top of the building, where there was a narrow balcony for them to take in the view. The mill’s sails creaked as they moved round, the arms making rustling noises like a ship’s cracking sails in a strong wind.

Zoe breathed in the fresh air—cleaner, she thought, than any she had ever experienced. Cassie was right. This was the best world for them to live in that they had come across so far. If they couldn’t find the Passage, would it be such a bad thing? They could aid the inventor and make a real difference here.

Lady Maltese pulled on a woolly hat. It was of a simple design, red like wine. Zoe shivered, suddenly aware of the stiffness of the breeze.

“That’s nice,” Zoe said, nodding to Lady Maltese’s hat. “Did you make it?”

“I did,” Lady Maltese said, beaming happily.

“My great aunt used to do a lot of knitting,” Zoe said. “She would make things and then sell them to make a little extra money.”

“She must have been good, for others to pay for them,” Lady Maltese said. “I doubt anyone would want to buy mine.”

Zoe peered closer at the garment and frowned.

“That’s remarkable,” she said.

“What is?” Lady Maltese said.

“Your knitting ability,” Zoe said. “You haven’t dropped one stitch.”

“I’m sure there are some,” Lady Maltese said.

“No,” Zoe said. “I can spot them a mile away. It’s perfect. You must have taken a very long time to make it, to have to keep going back and fixing the dropped stitches.”

“I am very slow,” Lady Maltese said with a grin.

“My great aunt was good,” Zoe said. “She always complained when she dropped a stitch and it was too far back to do anything about it. She always showed me where she’d done it. She never could figure out why it happened, why then of all places. Often she had been running on autopilot, hadn’t been interrupted, her mind taken off what she was doing. But there it was, the dropped stitch.

“She would still send it to her customers anyway, of course. They wouldn’t ever notice it. But my great aunt always did. Despite all her years of knitting she never made a garment that didn’t have a dropped stitch, she said.

“But now that I look at yours, I can see that you don’t have any dropped stitches. You must be something of a perfectionist! Or a prodigy. Remarkable. You would have expected at least one.”

“It comes with practice,” Lady Maltese said. “And I’m sure there are many mistakes if you look close enough. We all have our skills, do we not?”

Lady Maltese was looking off into the distance, toward the town. She seemed preoccupied by something.

“I was thinking about Jeffrey, the inventor,” Zoe said. “I’m interested in how he comes up with such ingenious ideas.”

“It’s in his blood,” Lady Maltese said. “His father was an inventor, and his father, and so on, right back through the ages. But every so often, once in every great while really, there comes along a man—or woman—with a unique ability. He could be the joiner of men, or born with the skill to invest, turning five galleons from a single one in no time. Every so often there is a leap forward in ability, in strength, in creativity. And that is the inventor.

“Jeffrey’s ancestors were all unusual. Some were insane, pushing the limits of what we might consider normal behavior, others were equally deranged, but of a helpful bent. The good they did greatly outweighed the bad their relations performed. They served their terms and did good work, each slightly pushing the envelope forward in our society. But Jeffrey is entirely unique.”

“Can I see his workshop?” Zoe said.

“His workshop?” Lady Maltese said.

“Yes,” Zoe said. “The place he develops his inventions. To see how he works. I won’t understand most of what he does, but as your husband said, we might be working with the inventor until we leave. Probably best to introduce ourselves and show him we’re not complete idiots.”

“Yes, of course,” Lady Maltese said. “I’m glad you have an interest in such things. I myself have no such skill. It’s hard for me to understand how a woman could be interested in science.”

“There are many women scientists and engineers on the surface,” Zoe said.

“Extraordinary,” Lady Maltese said.

“The advancement of three hundred years of society,” Zoe said.

“It’s breathtaking,” Lady Maltese said. “But is it always for the best, do you think?”

“No,” Zoe said. “Certainly not. But in many cases, yes.”

A distracted smile alighted Lady Maltese’s face. Then she turned to look back out in the direction of the town.

“I hope we will also make such advances,” she said. “Without leaving anyone behind.”

It sounded like a pipedream to Zoe. Advances for some invariably resulted in decline for others. It was a nice dream to have, so long as the dreamer knew that was what it was: a dream.

# 26.

THE ORCHARD was large, signs of it beginning long before they reached the farm. Fruit trees grew in the streets leading up to the farm on all sides.

It was one of the few farms located within the town walls, Roland told Cassie. When she asked him why, he asked her to give herself the answer.

Cassie shrugged.

“Think,” Roland said. “You’re smart enough to figure it out.”

Cassie took a moment before shrugging her shoulders again.

“Are you always this shy around guys?” Roland said.

Cassie glanced at him, and then looked away. She blushed. No, she was never shy like this with boys. She wasn’t a hussy, she had simply always gotten along better with boys than girls. The relationships were easier, simpler. If there was ever sexual tension and she sensed they might have been interested in her, she was quick to cut it short to avoid any problems.

If Cassie herself began to get the familiar stirrings of interest in one of the boys, she always took the time to get to know him first. Then she approached him, making it clear she liked him. It was best to be obvious, she’d found. Boys were oblivious to subtlety, except when they were making their own clumsy attempts.

“Maybe you’re used to feigning lack of intelligence with boys, but you don’t need to do that with me,” Roland said. “I like smart women. I guess it rubbed off on me from my mother. My tutor says we all eventually want what we were brought up with.”

Cassie’s face curled like she’d just bitten into a sour apple. It might have been true, but that didn’t make her want to think about it. She turned her mind to the reason for the farm within the protective walls.

“I guess you’d need it just in case of attack,” Cassie said.

A smile played across Roland’s lips.

“And why would that be useful?” he said.

“Because when you’re under attack, one of the most important resources you have, one that might mean the difference between success and failure, is the need to feed your people,” Cassie said.

She glanced at him again, and then looked away. She didn’t want to look stupid in front of him.

“That’s right,” Roland said. “You have a good head on your shoulders. We need a large stock of food in case we’re attacked by the dragon and can’t get out. It’s unlikely to happen now, of course, what with sacrificing the dead bodies to the dragon. It’s a hangover from the past when such attacks were common place. Now let me ask you another question…”

“Do we have to do this?” Cassie said. “I hate being tested.”

“This isn’t a test,” Roland said. “This is a question.”

“What’s the difference?” Cassie said. “When you already know the answer to the question, it’s a test. Isn’t that the difference between an innocent question and an exam? The fact those asking the questions already know what the answer is?”

Roland cocked his head to one side.

“Not necessarily,” he said with a smile. “It might be a question to validate what we *think* we know.”

He smiled a lot, and Cassie found it very distracting. Roland had one of the most beautiful smiles she had ever seen. It glowed, lighting up an entire room. It told you not to worry, that he would always be there to help you if you needed it. He would be a great lord.

They had reached the orchard’s front gates. Roland turned to their armed guards.

“Please wait here,” he said.

The guards nodded, bowed their heads, and stood outside the farm with hands resting on their sword hilts.

“You don’t need your security?” Cassie said.

“In town?” Roland said. “Almost certainly not. The people love my father. They wouldn’t want to harm him or his offspring. They want things to continue as they are.”

“Then why have them at all?” Cassie said. “You must admit, it sends a confusing message.”

“It does,” Roland conceded. “But we are English, and we love few things more than tradition. It might be outmoded, outdated, and unfashionable, but it is the way we have always done things. If we continue to do the things we’ve always done, there’s no reason we can’t continue to survive. And that’s tradition. Change is seen as dangerous. But have no fear. If someone does set upon us, we wouldn’t need my armed guards in any case. I’m exceptionally good with a sword.”

Cassie looked at the hilt of Roland’s sword sticking out of its scabbard.

“It’s encrusted with jewels,” Cassie said.

“Your powers of observation astound me,” Roland said.

Cassie glared at him.

“My point is, it is a show sword, meant to be gawped at by locals, not to be used,” she said.

Roland pulled his blade from its scabbard and laid the point across the back of his forearm.

“Is that real enough for you?” he said.

“Yes,” Cassie said. “But it doesn’t prove anything about your skill to use it.”

Roland blinked, startled. He replaced the blade and smiled at Cassie with his arms folded.

“You’re quite something, aren’t you?” he said.

Cassie wasn’t sure whether to take that as a compliment or not.

“It’s a good thing,” Roland said. “Most of the women here are…”

“Boring,” Cassie said.

“Consistent,” Roland said. “They’re cut from the same cloth and there’s little exciting about them. Nothing that sucks me in or makes me want to get to know them. Whereas you…”

He circled Cassie.

“You’re quite different,” he said. “Unlike any girls I’ve seen or likely to see here. Would you care for an apple?”

“Excuse me?” Cassie said.

The sudden change in topic had taken her by surprise.

“An apple,” Roland said, pointing at the glowing balls of red hanging suspended from the trees around them.

“Oh,” Cassie said. “Yes. Please.”

Roland reached up, went onto his tiptoes, and pulled a pair of apples free. Workers were inspecting the produce and picking the ripe specimens. They placed them in baskets almost overflowing with juicy fruit.

A strong wind whispered through the trees and made the leaves rattle. Some of the leaves snapped off and floated like confetti at the closing of a wedding ceremony, twisting and fluttering to the ground. The apple trees were arranged in long, seemingly unending, rows.

Cassie bit into her apple. It was bright red, juicy, and just about the most delicious fruit she had ever tasted. It was just the right mix of crunch and juiciness. She consumed the rest of the apple with hungry bites.

“Do you like it here?” Cassie said.

“It’s fine,” Roland said. “It’s relatively safe and there aren’t a lot of problems.”

“You don’t seem like the kind of person who would be happy in a small world like this,” Cassie said. “I could imagine you as a go-getter in a big city.”

“You think?” Roland said. “When you’re raised in a world such as this, the only one you’ve ever known, you don’t really think about it.”

“No, I suppose not,” Cassie said. “Which is why you should be allowed to try out the two and make your decision.”

“And you think being a go-getter in a city is better than a lord in a small town?” Roland said.

“I don’t think it’s better,” Cassie said. “Just different.”

“You were at the feast last night,” Roland said. “You heard my father offer his position to anyone who wishes to take it. Do you remember?”

“Yes,” Cassie said. “Has anyone ever accepted the challenge?”

“Yes, once,” Roland said. “The lord willingly gave up his power, and the challenger took it up.”

“What happened?” Cassie said.

“What do you think happened?” Roland said.

“Is this another test?” Cassie said with a frown.

Roland smiled.

“Sorry,” he said. “But how else do you think my father became lord?”

It took a moment for the comment to penetrate Cassie’s consciousness.

“Sorry?” she said. “What do you mean?”

“My father wasn’t born the lord,” Roland said. “And my mother wasn’t born to be the lord’s wife either.”

Cassie’s frown deepened.

“I’m sorry, you’ve lost me,” she said. “I thought that was how titles passed from one generation to another? By birth.”

“I guess it is the most logical thing to assume,” Roland said.

“How did that even happen?” Cassie said.

“It’s remarkable the things you can achieve if you put your mind to it,” Roland said.

“You’re telling me your father, the lord, was never born into his current position?” Cassie said.

She still couldn’t wrap her head around the information.

“That’s what I’m telling you,” Roland said. “Remarkable isn’t it? The opportunity was there, ready for anyone to come along and take. And then when someone finally did, my father did something remarkable, something no one, except my mother, believed he could do. It was him who came up with the idea to feed the dead bodies to the dragon. Everything he did was successful. It was like he was blessed and whatever he touched turned to gold.”

“The old lord must have been bummed,” Cassie said. “I would have regretted having that clause, letting someone else come along and take away all my power like that.”

“No, not really,” Roland said. “He’s a cobbler now. He’s much happier. Everyone says so. If he wasn’t, my father would find something in the castle for him to do.”

“Whoever came up with the idea for someone else to take over clearly never thought someone would actually step up to the plate,” Cassie said. “Otherwise they wouldn’t have created it.”

“And no one would have,” Roland said. “Until things went terribly wrong. The system was put in place to hold those in charge accountable, knowing that if they did a bad job someone else could easily take his position. The person taking up lordship only had humiliation to deal with. They had little else to lose, save face.”

“Why didn’t more people want to be lord?” Cassie said. “I know if I lived here a long time, I might want to try.”

“Because most don’t have the education to lead people,” Roland said. “People know this. People said my father was stupid for trying to be lord, that he would only end up shaming himself and my mother. But she supported him. Anyone can do it, it just takes time to learn how, just as it does with any job, but this time there are much fewer opportunities for failure, a sharp learning curve.

“If it wasn’t for both my mother and father there would still be people running around scared. It was because the dragon appeared and started terrorizing people fifteen years ago that my father decided someone needed to do something.

“It was from then that we managed to really begin to advance and develop, able to build the wall that could protect us. Of all the lords we’ve had, my father has had the most effect on the improvement of the people and their lives. I’m really proud of him.”

“Your father never considered removing the clause?” Cassie said. “To cement his power and stop anyone from doing what he did to the last lord?”

Roland looked like he had never considered the idea before.

“No,” he said. “He likes having it there. It keeps him on his toes. I like it too. I wouldn’t want the position if there was no chance of me being overthrown.”

“What did your father do before all this?” Cassie said.

“He was a stablehand,” Roland said. “He worked at my mother’s noble house before they got married. Then the dragon attacked, and the rest is history.”

“But they seem so…” Cassie said, searching for the right word.

“Cultured?” Roland said. “It’s an act. A practised act. One they’re exceptionally good at. They wouldn’t have been taken seriously by the nobles if they didn’t sound and look the part, and so that was one of the first things they did—make themselves look the part.”

Cassie began to realize just how special and unique the lord’s family was. They were not only the most powerful family in the town, but they were also the most forward-thinking. If the town was to change for the better, it was going to need them to lead.

# 27.

THE STAIRS wound around the inside of the cylindrical wall in a spiral. Before undergoing their adventure Zoe would have found it a difficult slog. Despite all the hours of running she'd put in on the surface, it was nothing compared to the workout she got down under the surface every day.

The stairs ended at a thick wooden door. Lady Maltese put her shoulder to it and pushed, but it was too heavy for her. Zoe joined her and pushed. They had left the guards at the bottom of the tower. At the time Zoe had liked the idea of being alone with the lady, but now she was beginning to regret that decision.

The workshop was located in the highest tower of the castle. It did not look like much on the outside, but on the inside it was full to bursting with worktables packed with tools and equipment.

It was a mess, as all the cleverest and more creative people were prone to be. Zoe supposed human creativity was the same wherever you went. A human mind preoccupied with thoughts was always less likely to be concerned with trivialities like tidiness.

"Originally Jeffrey's workshop was located on the other side of town," Lady Maltese said, "but my husband wanted to keep an eye on any new developments. So we relocated him here, where he could work in peace, with all the food and drink he might require, and all the silence he could ever need. We keep him very comfortable."

"So I can see," Zoe said. "A mind like his needs to be protected and well fed."

Buried amongst it all, sprawled in a moth eaten armchair, were the empty bottles of a drunk. Sitting amidst it was the creative genius drunk himself, Jeffrey. He was fast asleep, drooling, a thick mucus growing on his flat chest and grey-white beard.

A wire bird cage hung in one corner, and when Zoe approached it it became clear it wasn't as empty as she'd first thought. Flies buzzed around it, a pile of shapeless feathers in the bottom. So much for a pet to keep you

company. Zoe wondered how long it had been dead. Not that it mattered. Dead was dead.

“Should we wake him?” Zoe said.

“The bird?” Lady Maltese said. “I think it’s a bit late for that, don’t you?”

Zoe looked at the lady, who grinned.

“Sh,” Lady Maltese said, pressing her finger to her lips. “Let him awaken naturally. It’s how he comes up with his best ideas.”

Great. What were they meant to do in the meantime? Zoe had wanted to see the workroom and inventor at work, and now here she was. Jeffrey was hard at work. Drooling. Snoring.

Zoe decided she would take her time and poke around. As she moved around the room she realized that, despite the mess, there was nothing that would have looked all that out of place in the modern world. To be sure, there were items that looked like early prototypes of modern instruments, but their shape and materials were not all that different.

There was a makeshift TV, but the glass was too thick and wouldn’t have produced much in the way of a picture. But the theory was there, and the pieces of electronics to make it to boot. How someone from this time could have dreamed up something so sophisticated was beyond understanding for Zoe.

Newton was a genius of pure mind, unprecedented in his day, matched only by Einstein. These two men went into their own private rooms to figure out the laws of the universe and, incredibly, managed to come up with something so profound, so incredibly simple, logical and yet beautiful, that it could only be correct.

Jeffrey perhaps wasn’t able to solve the riddles of the universe, but had the remarkable ability to glimpse the future, or rather the present, on the surface. He could then develop his own systems of how they might work in this day and age.

Looking around, Zoe could see some of his inventions were rough, childlike interpretations of what he’d seen in his mind. Early stepping stones in the rapid evolution of man.

Zoe began to wonder about their moral code for helping these people. Was it right to give them a hand up? To help them to develop these forms of technology? She supposed it wasn’t like they would be helping them create dangerous weapons, or ways to split the atom. But wasn’t all

technology inevitably pointing in that direction anyway? If so, giving them any help whatsoever was dangerous. Zoe wasn't sure. She would need to speak to Bryan about it before they made any decisions.

Jeffrey grumbled under his breath. Then his eyes shot open. Lady Maltese approached him slowly and handed him a piece of paper and a pen. The inventor took it, not blinking, dipped the pen in the ink and began to draw on the parchment, slowly at first, and then gradually building into a frenzy, working faster and faster.

"What's he doing?" Zoe said, sidling up to Lady Maltese.

"Drawing his dreams," Lady Maltese said. "Inspiration has struck."

They waited for him while he completed his drawings, and didn't approach him again until he had finished. He put the pen down and lay back in his armchair.

Lady Maltese picked up the old man's sketch and extended it to Zoe so she could see. To her it looked like a bunch of scribblings and black shapes. She was disappointed.

"What is it?" Zoe said.

"I don't know," Lady Maltese said. "No one does, save him. Later, he will come to it and begin outlining whatever it was he originally saw in his dreams. Only once he has completed it will we begin to understand what it is he has drawn. Even then, with his description to us, we might not understand. Such is the mind of a genius. It works at its own speed and doesn't feel the need to slow down to cater for us."

Zoe looked again at the image. This time her mind came up with a dozen modern inventions it might have been. She looked at Jeffrey, who was already falling back to sleep. He really was a force of nature.

It wasn't for another fifteen minutes that the inventor decided to wake fully. He stumbled into the bathroom and washed his face, coughing up something Zoe didn't like to imagine. It could have been a lung by the sounds he was making.

A little refreshed, Jeffrey returned to his workroom. He started when he saw the two ladies standing there. He clearly hadn't noticed them earlier.

"Good morning," Jeffrey said.

"Evening," Lady Maltese said.

Jeffrey peered at the sky out the window.

"So it is," he said.

"How are you able to come up with such things?" Zoe said.

“I go to sleep and when I wake up, poof! It’s there!” Jeffrey said.

“That’s remarkable,” Zoe said. “We need more people like you on the surface to come up with solutions to our problems.”

“I get dizzy, feel a headache coming on, and I know then it’s time for me to lie down and let nature take its course,” Jeffrey said. “When I wake up, my hands are covered in oil or grease, or whatever it is I used during the night, and the finished item is on the table. The only difficulty then is trying to figure out what it is the damn thing does. I’ve near blown my ear off experimenting with these things.”

“Incredible,” Zoe said.

“I’m glad you’re pleased,” Jeffrey said with a grumble.

“No, I meant about your process,” Zoe said. “I know there are creative people on the surface who have ideas while they sleep and then use those ideas once they wake, but to do what you do… It’s like sleepwalking, but sleep inventing. It’s an amazing gift.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not always amazing,” Jeffrey said. “I get the worst headaches, usually when I wake up after a hard night of inventing. It doesn’t happen every night, only when inspiration strikes, I suppose.”

“We thought it best to keep him in isolation while he’s coming up with his designs,” Lady Maltese said. “We don’t want to wake him, in case it disturbs him from his work. Besides, I usually like to retire around this time. I have to keep up with my knitting somehow.”

“Yes,” Zoe said, still in awe. “That sounds like a good idea to me.”

# 28.

ABIGAIL LED Aaron through the streets of Silene, introducing him to the various districts and the people who ran the local businesses and services. She knew everyone by name, and they all knew her. She received free samples of their produce, which she always split in half and shared with Aaron. They were now returning to the castle.

“No one knows how old the town of Silene really is,” Abigail said. “But everyone knows the story of George and the dragon associated with it.”

“George and the dragon?” Aaron said.

“You haven’t heard it?” Abigail said. “It’s pretty famous. Well, so the elders say.”

“I might know of it,” Aaron said. “Refresh my memory.”

“It’s about a dragon that attacked a town, our town the story goes, the town of Silene,” Abigail said. “This was back before we got sucked down a sinkhole and trapped here, when we were on the surface, in England. It attacked and destroyed everything we’d built. It came up out of the lake, killing the locals, drowning its victim as it descended back into its lair.”

“What happened?” Aaron said.

“Well, the town began sacrificing its livestock to the dragon,” Abigail said. “But they soon ran out. And then they began sacrificing their children to the beast. They did it via a random lottery. Whichever two kids’ numbers were chosen, were sent to the beast. Then one day the lord’s daughter’s number came up.

“The lord pleaded with the people, offering half his lands, half his possessions and half his gold. But the townspeople refused, and his daughter was taken down to the lake. It was blind luck that George was passing by. He slayed the dragon and rescued the lord’s daughter.”

“It’s a good story,” Aaron said. “Is there any truth to it, do you think?”

“Who knows,” Abigail said. “You’re from the surface. Could there be much truth to it?”

“I don’t know,” Aaron said. “Only in the most abstract terms, I guess. It wouldn’t have been a dragon. It would have been something else, a virus or a lion or some other dangerous thing.”

Abigail shrugged.

“It was just a story,” she said. “That is, until we came down here. History has a funny way of repeating itself.”

“What do you mean?” Aaron said.

“About fifteen years ago some townspeople spoke of hearing growls and roars from the caves,” Abigail said. “No one took any notice of them, but then people started going missing, and before we knew it, we were missing five percent of our population. At first the people went missing in the caves, or near them, and then livestock started going missing, and then people from their own homes. And then one day the townspeople emerged from their homes to see the dragon with their own eyes, pulling a man toward the lake.

“People couldn’t believe what was happening. It wasn’t every day you saw a dragon. People ran to the church and prayed for salvation, for forgiveness for whatever it was they were supposed to have done to offend Him. As always, there was no response, and the killings kept happening. No matter what the people did, no matter what ideas the lord came up with, they always failed.

“We couldn’t sacrifice our livestock. Few enough had survived the sinkhole as it was. They were too valuable.”

“More valuable than people?” Aaron said.

“Sick, isn’t it?” Abigail said. “But true. If we lost every member of our flock there would be no way to replenish their number. We had more people, so they were more valuable. No one said it at the time, of course. But they all knew it. Their lives, and the lives of their children, were worth less than the sheep and the cows and chickens. I’m sure they would have come up with plans to defeat the dragon, but none of them would have worked. They were ill-equipped and badly trained. They would have all perished.

“First, they went through the old people. They mostly gave themselves up. But when they ran out, the decision was made to sacrifice the kids.”

“No,” Aaron said. “You can’t be serious.”

“Yes,” Abigail said. “Not the best chapter in our history. Kids couldn’t do the workload an adult could, and we couldn’t exactly start culling people who were doing important jobs already.”

“What about the parents of the kids?” Aaron said. “They let this happen?”

“They had no choice,” Abigail said. “They argued and said they would take their kid’s place, but it had been agreed beforehand that the kids would be chosen at random and had no choice but to take their place on the dragon’s platter. Hard to imagine now. There’s a noticeable gap in our demographic. A whole generation that was almost entirely eaten.

“Soon after my parents took over as the lord and lady of the town, they discovered the reason why the lake was always rotting and covered with flies,” Abigail said. “In the past, the townspeople stayed away from the lake, thinking it cursed. And then they discovered bodies were coming up out of the lake. They renamed it Lake Rebirth and fed the bodies to the dragon.

“The killings stopped. The townspeople immediately fell in love with my parents, supporting them with other things they wanted to do, like building a wall to protect themselves, in case the bodies stopped coming out of the lake.

“We made a statue celebrating the event. It shows George defeating the dragon, but really it was my parents that defeated it. It’s on the roof of the tower the inventor now resides in.

“We’re becoming stronger, more populated, and soon we might have the technology and manpower to destroy the dragon. It won’t take a single hero, but a whole town full of them. The statue will reflect the future too, of us overthrowing the monster. You see, our story is not yet complete. We still have to write the final chapter and, with any luck, it will be over very soon.”

# 29.

THE FAMILY returned to the castle to find another banquet had been laid on. Were they to expect this every night they were present at the castle? The family were tired, but they went through the rigmarole of having to mix with the townspeople again.

Bryan wasn't sure which group he disliked most. The undisguised filth of the streets, or the perfumed stink of the nobles. How could you trust anyone who so obviously attempted to cover up the truth about themselves? In truth, his real dislike was being forced to converse with those he had no choice but to talk to.

There was no such thing as a free lunch, and payment in this case was to have to converse with the locals, who plied them with questions and concerns. They were much more open in their asking of questions than last night, and it made the family exhausted to have to keep answering them.

Finally, happily, the family made it to the front of the hall. They took their seats and prepared to stuff themselves. Conversation was slow at first, the family necking as much of the delicious food as they could into their bodies. Only then did they share what they had discovered and learned with each other. Lots of interesting things, but no sign of the Passage.

The truth was frightening to Bryan. What if the lord was right and there was no Passage out of here? What if it had somehow been destroyed? What if this was as far as they could go? Suddenly the food tasted like ash in Bryan's mouth.

The town of Silene was a perfectly nice place to live, but it was so small and parochial that Bryan wouldn't have been able to live there for long without feeling depressed at everything he'd lost and worked hard for on the surface.

But no, Bryan thought. There had to be a Passage. There was always a Passage. They just hadn't found it yet. The most likely place—if for no other reason than Murphy's Law, was for the Passage to be in the one location they couldn't yet get to: the caves. It would be tucked away in there somewhere.

After the desserts and cakes were served, Lord Maltese took to the stage and addressed the audience. Did any of them have any concerns they wanted to address? After their first round of questions the previous night, and the fact there had been no sign of the dragon for one whole day, meant the locals were more comfortable with their present situation.

“No one?” Lord Maltese said. “Does no one have a concern they would like to address?”

A hand went up. It was at the lord’s head table.

“Bryan?” Lord Maltese said. “You have an enquiry?”

“I do,” Bryan said, getting to his feet. “I have a question for you and the whole town.”

“We’d like to hear it,” Lord Maltese said, retaking his seat.

He was clearly intrigued by Bryan’s intervention.

Bryan stood before the townsfolk.

“I have one question, and it won’t take long,” he said. “You have a dragon problem. It pillaged your livestock, your friends and family. You came up with a solution, by feeding the dragon the bodies of the dead. And you’ve built your walls and developing weapons to protect yourselves. My question, then, is why do you continue to feed the dragon?”

Bryan let the question sink in. A hush came over the audience. Bryan tried to read their expressions, but they were blank.

“Perhaps I might explain,” Lord Maltese said with a friendly smile. “Perhaps my explanation of our situation wasn’t very clear earlier. We feed the dragon so we might live in peace and continue to develop our resources. If we did not feed the monster, it would attack us once again and destroy everything we’ve managed to forge till now.”

“I understand that,” Bryan said. “But why not take the opportunity to kill it?”

Lord Maltese smiled again, as if talking to a slow child.

“As I said before, we lack the resources to mount an attack on the creature,” he said. “It would have torn through us, destroyed us. Decimated our population, and we’d have nothing left to show for it.”

“Yes,” Bryan said. “But why didn’t you kill it?”

Lord Maltese frowned. He thought he’d just answered this question.

“I’m not sure I understand…” he said.

“There are more ways to kill a dangerous creature than to attack it head-on,” Bryan said. “You could trap it, drown it, starve it, poison it, burn it…

You’re limited only by your imagination. Once the monster is out of the way, you could continue developing at your own pace in a manner you choose. You’d never have to fear the dragon again.”

There was a shiver of nervous murmurs through the town’s inhabitants. They were entertaining the idea, sounding like a hive of killer bees.

But Bryan wasn’t finished. He had plenty more to say yet.

“There’s also the evidence of tampering,” he said.

“Tampering?” a local said. “What does that mean?”

“It means changing, editing something,” Bryan said. “About a hundred years ago people were beginning to make discoveries of fossils of large animals no one had ever seen before. They were being described as giant crocodiles and iguanas. Over the century that passed, we gained great insight into these ancient creatures. We called them dinosaurs, giant animals that lived millions of years ago all over the surface.

“One of the creatures, one of the most fierce and terrifying, was called a Tyrannosaurus Rex, or T-Rex for short. They were believed to be extinct, like all dinosaurs, until we got sucked through a sinkhole and saw they were very much still alive, deep beneath the Earth’s surface.

“You have one here too. Only it isn’t just a T-Rex, but an altered creature. It carries a metal pack on its back, perhaps as a shield or protection, I don’t know. And the way it breathes fire, that isn’t natural in any living creature. This too could be a machine someone attached to it to make it look more like a dragon.

“On the surface we have advanced technology and could build these things, a way to upgrade a creature like this. I realize these things might seem like magic to you, but I can assure you, they’re not. They’re processes that abide by the laws of science, that we manipulate and use to our advantage. They are not magic. There is no such thing.

“But someone here, or out there, as yet undiscovered by us, is trying to scare you into believing this creature is a dragon, when really it is just a dinosaur in costume.

“How the T-Rex got to be here is anyone’s guess, but it shouldn’t be here. It is a mistake of nature, for you and this creature to be occupying the same space. But it can be undone, and it can be undone by you all.”

A local stood up. It was Montgomery.

“What you suggest is impossible!” he said. “We cannot kill the dragon!”

“It is impossible if you accept it is,” Bryan said. “It doesn’t look impossible from where I sit. I’ve seen people with far less intelligence and technology than you defeat a similar creature in another world. You can too.”

The townsfolk muttered amongst themselves.

“How would you suggest we do it?” Cynthia Morris said, standing up so everyone could hear her loud booming voice.

Bryan was hoping someone would have the courage to ask that question.

“We starve the beast out,” Bryan said. “We stop feeding it.”

The locals exploded into loud outbursts:

“Not feed it?”

“Do you know what it’ll do to us if we stopped? It’ll come for our children!”

“We’ve got a family to worry about!”

“What happens when it gets inside the walls? Then we’ll all be dead!”

Bryan held up his hands to help allay their fears.

“You’re afraid,” he said. “I would be afraid too if I were in your shoes. But look, the world where the bodies come from was destroyed. It means there will no longer be a constant influx of feeding material for the monster. There might be a lot at first, but they will quickly dry up. The monster is going to be starved out anyway. I say we strike while we have control.”

“As soon as the dragon gets in here, with its fiery breath, it’ll destroy our town!” Montgomery said.

“We’ll starve the dragon,” Bryan said. “He’ll come out of his lair. It’ll have no choice but to come out. We’ll have food set up, a trap to kill it. It’s a dumb animal. We can defeat it.”

“I say we let you defeat it!” another local said.

“We can’t let him anger the beast!” Montgomery said. “It’ll come after us after it’s done picking its teeth with his bones!”

“We’re in this trouble because of you!” Cynthia said, pointing a finger at Bryan. “And your family. If you hadn’t come here, the dragon would still be in its cave and we wouldn’t have to be afraid all over again!”

“Leaving you alone to cower in fear,” Bryan said. “To not stand up and fight.”

“I would rather not fight and survive than to stand and die!” Montgomery said.

Lord Maltese stood up, waving his hands to keep the people calm.

“Listen,” he said. “I can see Bryan has gotten you all a little riled up, but the truth is, he might be right. Perhaps it is time for us to rid our world of this demon from hell. It is only flesh and blood. We can destroy it if we only have the will. Perhaps all this time that was what we were really missing: a hero to champion our cause. To aid in Bryan’s effort to destroy the dragon, I will pledge a dozen of our guards to his effort.”

There were murmurs of assent from the locals. Sporadic clapping.

“We always planned to rid ourselves of this beast,” Lord Maltese said. “Perhaps now is the time.”

He raised a goblet.

“To Bryan,” he said. “Our dragon hunter.”

# 30.

THE TRAP consisted of half a dozen sheep carcasses courtesy of the lord's larder and five buckets of pig blood from the town's butchers. It would be irresistible to the monster.

The breeze was good, blowing in the direction of the caves, carrying the scent with it. There was no way the monster could avoid it. It would drive him berserk.

The trap was a simple one. A series of snares made of high tensile wire had been laid across the ground in a grid pattern. Once the monster approached, the wire would wrap around its foot and draw so tight it would cut into his thick flesh, slicing to the bone if the monster pulled too hard, which Bryan fully expected it would.

Another circle of wire hung suspended in midair in front of the food. This was their failsafe in case the wires on the ground were not sprung. The monster wouldn't see it. Even Bryan couldn't see it—he'd walked into it twice already. A pair of guards stood behind a tree with a rock that hung suspended to the choke wire.

Only once the creature had been adequately ensnared would the soldiers leap forward. Armed with pointed spears and sharp swords, they would hack at the monster as quickly as they were able. These guards were currently camped behind a large rock, along with Bryan and his family, that prevented them from being seen by the monster.

But the creature hadn't shown his face yet, hadn't graced them with his presence, nor even so much as greeted them with a growl. Bryan didn't understand why. The meal should have been irresistible to the monster, who hadn't eaten for the past few days.

"How's it going?" a sweet voice said.

It was Abigail, leading a retinue of serving men to give the soldiers food and refreshment.

"Nothing yet," Aaron said. "He should have come by now. I know I would have, if I was a mindless eating machine. Oh, are those lemon cakes?"

Aaron tucked into them, picking up two in each hand.

“Leave some for the guards,” Bryan said, shaking his head.

“There’s more than enough for everyone to eat,” Abigail said.

“Luckily,” Bryan said. “For everyone else.”

Aaron chuckled around a mouthful of lemon cake, the crumbs spilling from his lips.

There was a roar. It echoed from deep within the cave catacombs.

The lemon cake froze halfway to Aaron’s mouth. He turned deathly pale. Clearly the memory of being chased through the caves by the dinosaur was still fresh in his mind. It was still fresh in Bryan’s too, but he wasn’t about to let it stop him from wiping the beast from the face of the Earth, or the under-Earth, as the case may be.

Bryan wasn’t the only one to turn silent. The servers who’d brought the food had turned white as a ghost, and even the guards, who seemed as hardy as they came, clutched their weapons tight, not in an aggressive stance, but one requiring support.

Bryan was struck by a sudden lack of confidence. Would these men, who had grown up with the fear of the dragon, be able to do what was needed when the time came? To look the dragon in the eye and shove their spears into its heart? Or would they run away, scared and afraid, into the night? There was no doubt in his mind: they would turn and run.

A man was only as brave as his experiences. A man used to darkness could be brave with no light, another accustomed to the roar of great beasts could walk through a pride of lions undisturbed. But a man used to stories of a demon that resided in a cave could not stand against it.

The roars from the caves died down, and the guards returned to their vigil. They stared at the ground and did not eat their cakes and drink.

“How’s the town?” Bryan said.

“It’s fine,” Abigail said. “They’re all nervous, worried you might cause the monster to be angry and attack us. The nobles are glad you’re doing this, that you might put it down for good. Not that they would ever admit that.”

“Of course not,” Bryan said. “That would be too easy.”

As a businessman he knew what people were like. They were generally good and kind hearted, but they could also be very selfish. They were quick to blame, to point the finger, even if the culprit was really themselves.

“It has to come out of there at some point,” Bryan said. “It’s just a matter of time.”

“Time,” Abigail said. “It’s always about time, isn’t it?”

“Time always plays a factor somehow,” Bryan said.

A wagon piled with scorched bodies trundled along a rough path. Just as Bryan had predicted, there had been a massive influx of bodies, no doubt in reaction to the destruction of the magma world they had inhabited. Bryan had been right, and it had drawn nervous consternation from the townsfolk.

Still, they looked upon the floating bodies as their only salvation. They wanted to pick them up and drop them off at the cave for the monster to consume. It was a tried and tested solution to their problem, and they did not like to change it, even if it was for the best, a solution to their problem for the rest of their lives.

The locals didn’t really believe the previous world—hell, in their minds—had really been destroyed, but their eyes goggled when they set eyes upon the burnt feathers of the giant Humungo birds that washed up on the surface of the lake. They had never seen such a beast before. Several of the locals performed a strange little dance, brushing themselves off, turning in a circle, and spitting. It was to dispel bad luck and spirits, Abigail said.

Then, when half a dozen giant snakes emerged, the locals believed the apocalypse was upon them, that the demons of hell were about to descend. There was no telling the locals they were just animals from another world. They had made up their minds and were blind to the truth. It was infuriating. They buried the bodies in giant pits—one for the human bodies, another for the creatures.

The church bell rang.

A voice shouted something from the top of the tower. The distance was too great for Bryan to hear. The ringing seemed different to what was used for when the dragon attacked. That had been a high shrill sound. This was a different rhythm: two taps, followed by a pause. It was repeated over and over. It was smart for the locals to design an intricate system of communication.

“What is he shouting?” Bryan said.

“Murder,” Abigail said. “There’s been a murder.”

The same thought passed between them: while they were watching these cave entrances, was there another one they weren’t aware of, that the

dragon had used to escape and enter the town?

The blood drained from Bryan’s face. Had his plan cost someone’s life?

# 31.

THEY HAD to wait at the front entrance before the gates were opened. Five minutes is an agonizingly long time when forced to wait. When your loved ones were inside the town. When there had been a murder and you don’t know who the victim was.

The gates opened, revealing pandemonium. People ran riot, not knowing what they were doing or where they were going.

Bryan dismounted and handed the reins to one of the guards. He pushed through the crowd, grunting when someone ran into him.

He came to group of people standing around. They glanced at Bryan as he pushed through them. They turned their eyes from him. Bryan’s insides turned to water.

Something was wrong.

Was it Zoe or Cassie who had been hurt? Had the locals felt so aggrieved with Bryan’s plan that they would act with violence against his family?

Bryan pushed harder through the crowd. The people saw him and began to move aside. Then he came to the wide clearing in the center.

There were a dozen guards, doing their best to block the view of a body lying on the ground, but failing. There was blood, spread like a finger painting by a child.

“What happened here?” Bryan said. “What happened?”

“Murder,” a bystander said. “Murdered in cold blood.”

He said it in a tone of voice that made it clear this was not a common occurrence in the town of Silene.

Bryan stared at the unmoving body. It wasn’t Cassie, nor Zoe. It was Cynthia, the loud-voiced woman from the hall meetings. Her face was twisted in a mask of shock.

Peering around, with the locals eyeballing Bryan the way they were, it was clear at whose feet they placed the blame.

# 32.

THE GREAT HALL was crammed. Every member of town was present. A meeting had been called, an impromptu affair. None of the chairs and tables had been set out as they had during feast days.

The people milled, mumbling with folded arms to angry neighbors. Bryan sensed a strong atmosphere of discontent. The locals eyed him and his family as they took their place on the stage.

Bryan didn't entirely understand what was going on. These were essentially the middle ages. Did they still hang people? Or cut off their heads? There was a fiery anger and hate in their eyes that he had rarely seen.

"Silence, please," Lord Maltese said.

The people quietened down.

"Today we have suffered a great tragedy," Lord Maltese said. "Cynthia Morris, one of our number, was brutally slain in the street, by someone armed with a cloak and dagger. Who would commit such a crime, and for what reason, to an innocent bystander, is anyone's guess. But the police and my guards are working together to find the perpetrator."

"It was the evil spirits!" Montgomery said. "We angered the monster and he sent spirits here to do his bidding!"

"'He's an animal," Lord Maltese said. "He doesn't bid, doesn't do anything any other animal can't do."

"Hidden in shadow, he was," another local said, apparently present at the murder when it'd happened. "Wearing the darkness and shadows as a cape!"

"Wearing a black cape," Lord Maltese said. "Not shadows and darkness. Though we can say the killer certainly had darkness in his heart. The police are conducting an investigation and I'm confident we will find the murderer."

"What are we all pussy footing around for?" Montgomery said with folded arms. "We all know who's responsible for this."

"Their plan caused poor Cynthia's murder!" a fearful local said. "I'd rather it was their blood than any of ours! I say we sacrifice them before

another one of us has to die!”

“Yeah!” the crowd said.

“We didn’t want anyone to die!” Zoe said, stepping forward. “It’s the last thing we wanted to happen. And who knows, this might have happened anyway, no matter what we tried to do with the monster.”

But the crowd—the mob, really—was not appeased. They wanted blood. Suddenly Bryan realized how dangerous their situation was. At least if a monster was after you it didn’t smile at you through its teeth. It was honest with its intentions. It was out to eat you, to feed upon your flesh.

Now, the townsfolk’s mask had slipped. They had pretended to be the family’s friends when they first arrived, but now they wanted their blood. The people had judged them once again on the result, and not the objective, what it was they were trying to achieve, to make the world a better, safer place. Instead, the locals were intent on crucifying them.

There was only one man who could save them, one man who could get the locals to calm down, relax. Bryan turned to the lord and his family.

“Please,” Bryan mouthed. “Help us.”

He thought he caught sight of a small smile on the lord’s lips, one that did not look entirely accommodating.

But the lord got to his feet, and set his shirt collar and sleeves straight. He was enjoying himself, getting comfortable for what he was about to say. He looked up and addressed the crowd.

“This is not anyone’s fault,” Lord Maltese said. “Did any member of this family wield a knife? Did they attack the victim? Of course not. Bryan and Aaron were outside the town at the time, working to protect us, all of us. Zoe and Cassie were with Jeffrey, working on his designs. I myself can attest to that. They aren’t responsible.

“Are farmers responsible for the bad weather if the crops they planted die? Of course not. Should we have trusted a stranger and his family? Yes, we should. We didn’t care who they were. We made the decision to listen to them, to want to do what they wanted, and not care about the outcome. Because it was worth it. To rid the world of the dragon forever? It was a good plan, but it just didn’t work out, that’s all. And here we stand, ready to kill them for it.

“This is a tragedy, no doubt about it. We should focus on finding the perpetrator so we can get on with our lives and get on with what we’re doing, with developing and making our future brighter.”

The locals didn’t seem very sated, their anger still plain on their faces. But they broke, and the mob began to disperse and head out the door.

“What do we do now?” Zoe said. “I’m not sure I feel very comfortable with all these people here, wanting to kill us.”

“Don’t go anywhere by yourself,” Bryan said. “No one goes out by themselves, under any circumstances.”

The dragon was no longer their greatest threat.

# 33.

THE FUNERAL was a sad, dour affair, at total odds with the one in the previous world where it had been normal to burn bodies in pits of red hot magma. Here, it was more akin to what happened up on the surface, with a priest reading from a Bible over the body of the dead, family and friends gathered around.

They were in the church's graveyard, a pretty spot that backed up to a small grove of trees. There were many other tombstones here, dating back several centuries. Several were clearly very recent, the soil of the graves still visible where the grass had not yet grown through.

Everyone wore black, matching their sad expressions. The murder had come as a shock. The victim had been a baker's assistant, Bryan learned from the eulogy. Her rolls were the envy of the whole town. Her secret recipe would be buried with her.

The undertaker began shoveling dirt on the casket. The crowd began to disperse, filtering off in various directions. The family left too, heading their own way.

"We were close to trapping the monster too," Bryan said. "If we could have waited just a little longer, a few more days, we would have had him. I'm sure of it."

"Hm," Zoe said.

Bryan looked at Zoe. She was wearing a frown.

"What is it?" Bryan said.

"It's the murder," Zoe said. "What are the odds it would happen right then of all times? Right when you were there, trying to catch the monster?"

"You're saying it was used as a distraction?" Bryan said.

"Yes," Zoe said. "At least, it is a possibility, don't you think?"

"Yes," Bryan said. "It is certainly that."

"It makes more sense, now I think about it," Zoe said. "No natural creature could breathe fire the way it does. It was designed. We know that. But who designed it?"

"You think someone here designed it?" Bryan said.

“What other explanation can there be?” Zoe said. “How else can a dinosaur breathe fire? And someone put that metal shield on its back. I’m betting the person who did that was the same person who murdered Cynthia.”

“Why would someone do that?” Bryan said.

“To stop us searching the caves,” Zoe said.

“You’re saying there’s something in there someone here is willing to murder for?” Bryan said.

“Yes,” Zoe said. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. Who knows, it might even be the Passage they’re trying to keep hidden.”

“It seems to me you’re talking about the same thing,” Cassie said. “We want to find the Passage. If we’re right, and Cynthia was murdered in order to distract us from capturing the monster, then if we can find the murderer…”

“We also find the person responsible for the dragon,” Zoe said. “Ingenious.”

“In that case, isn’t it obvious who did the murder?” Aaron said.

The others turned to look at him. Aaron checked over his shoulders in case someone was close enough to hear, but they were alone.

“There’s only one person here capable of making the technology the T-Rex now wears,” Aaron said.

“Who?” Zoe said.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Aaron said.

Zoe ran the evidence through her mind, her eyes widening at Aaron’s thought process and the conclusion he must have come to.

“No,” she said. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am serious,” Aaron said. “Can you think of anyone else who might be capable of designing such advanced technology?”

“But he’s not capable!” Zoe said. “You’ve seen him!”

“It could all be an act,” Bryan said. “The perfect camouflage. To disguise himself as a bumbling idiot genius.”

“But he’s shown his hand,” Zoe said. “His skills betray him. It’s Jeffrey!”

# 34.

“JEFFREY?” Lord Maltese said. “Our inventor, Jeffrey? We’re talking about the same person? You can’t be serious. He wouldn’t hurt a fly!”

“He did hurt a fly once,” Abigail said. “I was there. I saw him do it.”

“It’s a figure of speech,” Lord Maltese said, rolling his eyes.

“I don’t care,” Abigail said, pursing her lips. “It’s true. He did hurt a fly once.”

“I, for one, am not surprised,” Roland said. “He always seemed a bit fishy to me.”

“But where is your evidence?” Lady Maltese said. “And even if he is guilty, he already lives like a hermit. What else can we do to him? Taking away his workshop will harm us more than it does him. We would only be hurting ourselves.”

“So we’re supposed to just let him get away with it?” Lord Maltese said. “Because he’s of use to the town? He shouldn’t be punished if it turns out he is responsible for Cynthia’s death?”

“No one would have to know about it,” Lady Maltese said. “We could keep it between ourselves. Then he could carry on doing what he does.”

“And murdering other innocent people,” Lord Maltese said. “No. The people must have justice, whatever form that takes.”

“This is all academic,” Lady Maltese said. “Until we speak with him and either he confesses or the police discover the evidence for themselves.”

“Why haven’t they figured out it was Jeffrey too?” Aaron said.

“Because they’re approaching it as police investigators investigating a crime,” Bryan said. “We’re looking at it from the outside. Whether Jeffrey is responsible for it or not there’s no denying the fact he must be responsible for what was done to the T-Rex. I’m betting that before he came along, the T-Rex never had the ability to breathe fire, did he?”

“No,” Lord Maltese said. “At least, I don’t think so.”

“Should we go to the police?” Zoe said.

“No,” Lord Maltese said. “What you say makes sense, assuming any of it is true. But he has become a friend of the family. The least we can do is

confront him in person before we contact the authorities. I wouldn't want to undermine our friendship now."

The lord stood up.

"Come on then," he said. "Let's get this over with."

# 35.

THE DOOR squeaked open on ancient hinges. The room inside was dusty and packed to the rafters with items. Most of it Zoe could name but there were some things she had no name for, nor idea what they were meant to do.

It was a dream world for hoarders of useless garbage, and amongst this rubble, like a bomb had gone off, was meant to lie the hope and future of this world. If that was true, this world was in bigger trouble than Zoe thought.

“Jeffrey?” Lady Maltese said out loud to the room.

The armchair where he was usually fast asleep was vacant, the depression his body had made pressed into it. The chair had been disturbed, slightly off its axis, a small coffee table knocked over, spilling a cup of tea or coffee over the tiled floor.

The rest of the room was its usual mess, of course, but it was a well-ordered chaos, the kind of space where the occupant knew where everything was, that if pushed, he could recall precisely where he’d put every object.

But there was something somehow wrong with the whole situation, as if it had been set up for their benefit. Nothing about this room felt like it had before. All the warmth had been stripped from it, and when they rounded the corner, they could see why.

Zoe’s hand went to her mouth, covering her shock. She turned back to block the kids’ view, and even the lord’s kids, but it was too late. They’d already gotten an eyeful.

Zoe turned them away in any case, and led them back toward the door, to look out the window at the regular world and the town where everything was business as usual. Zoe for one needed the air.

Each time Zoe blinked she saw another image behind her eyelids, of Jeffrey’s wrinkled hand, outstretched and reaching for something across the tiles, of his face hidden from her, pressed to the hard floor. His straggling hair, so much like Einstein’s wayward style, stuck out at odd

angles. His body was twisted into a position his large frame was not used to, a yoga pose that forced the joints beyond their usual extremes.

Zoe and the others had seen a lot of death over the past couple of weeks, but it had always been in the pursuit of something, had been unavoidable. And it had always occurred in foreign and dangerous situations. This death happened in familiar settings, in a room that Zoe had been in before. She had met the old man that was now dead.

We all have a clock, Zoe thought morbidly, and none of us really know how much time we have left. To a large extent, it didn't really matter how much time you had remaining. It was how you used that time to enjoy yourself, the quality of time, that was the most important thing.

Bryan crouched over the dead body, inspecting it.

"What happened to him?" Cassie said.

"I don't know," Zoe said. "I know as much as you."

Her mind was working on overdrive, coming up with wild theories. Where these theories came from, Zoe didn't know. Probably from a lifetime of stories and movies and TV shows, but she couldn't shake the feeling that something bad and underhanded had taken place.

It wasn't long before Bryan came over.

"Are you all okay?" he said.

He hugged them each in turn, and gave a comforting smile to the lord's kids.

"We're fine," Zoe said. "What happened to him?"

"Heart attack," Bryan said.

"But there was blood…" Zoe said.

"He hit his head when he fell," Bryan said. "He cut open his nose and forehead, spilling the blood over the floor."

"That's terrible," Zoe said. "That he had to die alone."

"According to the lord and lady, he was often alone," Bryan said. "It was inevitable he would go by himself."

"I suppose," Zoe said.

She set the crazy theories and conjecture in her mind aside. The death had been entirely natural, though what the town was going to do without their beloved inventor, Zoe didn't know.

He may have been a little crazy, having used his technology to make the dragon an even more deadly foe, but he had also been the light and

salvation of the town’s future. How were they going to cope without him now?

# 36.

THE NEXT few days passed slowly. The family searched for the Passage in every nook and cranny of the world, save the caves. The dragon stayed in its hovel, not bothering to come out. No doubt it had had its fill somewhere.

As predicted, the number of bodies coming out of Lake Rebirth had trickled to a stop. Starving hungry, the monster would be forced to attack the town. It was the only food source around.

Bryan warned the lord about this, that they should maintain vigil over the trap they had set, but the town still blamed Bryan for Cynthia's death and the lord seemed unwilling to rail against his townsfolk supporters.

Lord Maltese had installed the world's greatest engineers and inventors in Jeffrey's former tower. They worked hard, but couldn't make head nor tail of his designs.

Bryan assisted them as best he could, but he was severely limited by the technology of the time. There were so many fields of expertise on the surface that it boggled the mind. He needed all of them if he was to replicate the kind of prototypes Jeffrey had designed.

Funny, that the destruction of one world could have such a devastating impact on another, and it would continue to do so. It just went to show how inextricably linked each of these independent worlds truly were.

While he was out searching for the Passage, Bryan ran Jeffrey's inventions through his mind. He worked with the other engineers in the evenings. Though he couldn't say he helped with the inventions much, he was able to teach the young engineers about advanced engineering.

They were empty, but hungry, receptacles, ready to absorb everything he had to tell them. It was refreshing to find such willing young minds. It opened him up to the concept of becoming a teacher one day, should they ever manage to get to the surface.

They needed to get to the caves, Bryan felt. There was nowhere more likely for the Passage to be than amongst its catacombs. But they couldn't enter it, not until the monster was no longer there. Most likely while it was attacking the town.

He and Zoe talked long and hard about what they would do in such a situation. They decided they wouldn't leave the town that had been so kind to them—relatively speaking—and would stand beside them and fight.

But if the fight turned against them, and it was clear the dragon was going to overpower and destroy the town, then the family would escape to the caves and take refuge, searching for the Passage.

The dragon would eventually return, the caves being its home, but they could take their time, learn the monster's routine, and work their way through the caverns one by one until they discovered what they were looking for. It wasn't a foolproof plan, but it was the best they had.

It wasn't until the third evening of the third day after the inventor's passing that a thought struck Bryan, coming at him from an unexpected angle.

The giant feasts had come to an end, the excitement of a vibrant future gone in the wind. Aaron worked with Bryan in the evenings sometimes, to help educate the engineers on subjects Bryan had no clue about—predominantly wildlife and nature. It was after one of these events, during a discussion over dinner, that Bryan had his brainwave.

"The more I learn about Jeffrey, the more I realize how incredible he truly was," Aaron said, spearing a slice of steak with his fork. "I mean, being able to think so far ahead into the future like that, it's remarkable. He was like Da Vinci, but with the engineering skills to back it up. He was one of a kind. There won't have been many people like him in our history. His death was a real loss."

"With his death went the future of our people," Lord Maltese said. "We'll survive, but that wasn't what I wanted when I became lord. I wanted to do more than survive. I wanted to thrive."

Lady Maltese put a comforting hand on her husband's arm and gave him a supportive, tight-lipped smile.

"We'll be all right," she said. "You'll see."

"With time, you'll piece together what the inventor had scribbled on those pieces of paper," Zoe said.

"Time," Lord Maltese said. "The one resource we do not have."

Time.

There was something about that, Bryan thought. Time. He turned his head to one side and set his fork down. Zoe saw him do it, and lowered her head to whisper to him.

“Are you all right?” she said.

“Yes,” Bryan said with a frown. “Yes, I’m fine. Excuse me.”

He got up and moved for the stairs, brow knitted in deep thought. He moved up the stairs without remembering he took a single one, and went to his and Zoe’s shared room. He moved to the balcony, leaned against it, and peered out over the town.

“Time,” he said out loud.

It was ten minutes before the door opened, admitting Zoe.

“Are you all right?” Zoe said. “It’s not like you to leave before the dessert course.”

“I’m fine,” Bryan said, still distracted.

“You’re not going to work with the engineers tonight are you?” Zoe said. “You need a night off. Time to recharge your batteries.”

“Time,” Bryan said abruptly.

“What?” Zoe said.

“Time,” Bryan said. “It’s all about time.”

“What is?” Zoe said.

“The inventor,” Bryan said. “He was ahead of his time. Too far ahead. He couldn’t have known the things he knew, couldn’t have dreamed the things he did.”

“But he did,” Zoe said.

“Says who?” Bryan said.

“Says everyone in town,” Zoe said.

“But no one ever saw him making these things,” Bryan said. “No one ever saw him do much more than make vague sketches from his dreams.”

“The mind is an incredible thing,” Zoe said.

“It is,” Bryan said. “But it is limited by the time in which it exists. Da Vinci was a genius, no doubt about it. He could look at nature and extrapolate ideas based on that. But if there was no nature, he wouldn’t have had the ideas.”

“I don’t know what you’re saying,” Zoe said. “Because Jeffrey had dreams. That was his input.”

“But where do dreams come from?” Bryan said. “From our everyday lives. Input. Experiences. He couldn’t have dreamed about the things they say he did. This is the real world. Things like that don’t happen.”

“Then where did he get his ideas from?” Zoe said.

“From his own experiences,” Bryan said. “And time. He wasn’t from this time, anymore than the dragon is. He came here via a sinkhole. He was from our time.”

“If he was, why wouldn’t he just tell the locals here?” Zoe said.

“Maybe he liked to be thought of as a genius,” Bryan said. “Look at the comfortable lifestyle he has down here. All he had to do was come up with something from the surface and pass it off as his own, and then build it—if he could.”

“I don’t buy it,” Zoe said. “The inventor wasn’t that kind of person.”

“To build these things, he needed to have real engineering experience,” Bryan said. “I studied engineering and I know how difficult these things are to build armed only with ancient materials.”

“Then how did he build them?” Zoe said.

“No one ever saw him making these things, why not, if he really was an engineer?” Bryan said. “It leaves one possible explanation.”

“What?” Zoe said.

“He didn’t build them,” Bryan said. “Someone did it for him.”

“What?” Zoe said.

“Someone else down here is from the surface,” Bryan said. “And used Jeffrey as a cover. The real inventor is still alive. He’s among us.”

# 37.

WITH THE DRAGON growing hungrier by the day, their time was growing short. It would attack the town and harvest innocent people to sate its hunger. If Bryan wanted to test his hypothesis he needed to hurry.

He told the lord and lady there was an experiment he wished to carry out. It would help to shed light on their current situation, but that he couldn't tell them what the test entailed.

"You want me to have the whole town take part in an experiment, an experiment you won't tell me the purpose of?" Lord Maltese said. "Have I got that right?"

"Yes," Bryan said. "It will take just a little of their time, but it will be worth it."

"And you can't tell me anything about it?" Lord Maltese said.

"No, sir," Bryan said.

The lord paced up and down his study twice before turning to Bryan.

"How can I tell the people to do something without explaining to them what it is?" he said.

"The same as I have done with you," Bryan said. "They trust you. They will do as you say. I want you to trust me."

"Trust you?" Lord Maltese said.

"Yes," Bryan said. "No one will come to any harm. This is for the benefit of the whole town. If we can get them organized, it needn't take long."

The lord thought about Bryan's suggestion for ten minutes, in silence, before he nodded.

"Very well," he said. "But it had better work."

The church bell rang, a curious triple tap and long pause, repeated over and over. Everyone stopped working and spilled out of their homes and places of work, into the street. They walked to the castle and lined up outside.

They were told nothing about why they were there or what they were meant to do, besides line up and wait, that it would take just a few minutes, and none of them would come to any harm.

Speculation was rife. The longer they stood outside waiting, the weirder and more outlandish the theories became. Only children under fifteen were exempt from the experiment. Even the old and infirm had to take part.

The townsfolk stood outside the castle on the eastern side. They formed a long queue along the wall that wrapped around to the northern side. They hid their worry and concern behind jovial expressions. Really, they were all very nervous.

# 38.

LEONARD, or Lenny to his friends, was the first in line.

He worked at the tannery across the road from the castle, so he had less distance to travel. He'd always liked the fact he was so close to the castle, where he could see the comings and goings of the lord and lady. And having the guards so close always made him feel protected, not that there was ever much to fear in the town of Silene. But now it felt like a threat, having to be the first to do whatever they were there for.

The door opened, and the girl from the new family—he thought her name was Cassie—was there to welcome him inside. Only he was allowed in. The door shut behind him, causing Lenny to jump.

"Please come this way," Cassie said.

She led him to a small room. There were guards arranged at regular intervals. A plain table sat in the middle with four boxes on it. The rest of the family stood behind the table.

"Hello," Bryan said. "Please come in."

Lenny realized he was shaking.

"Am I in trouble?" he said.

"Not at all," Bryan said. "We're just going to conduct a little test. It will only take a few minutes and won't hurt. Please step up to the table."

The test was over within a few minutes. Lenny studied the family's expression to gauge whether he had performed the test well or not, but their faces were cold and emotionless. He was ushered out of the room, to the main hall. There were guards here too.

"Please don't go anywhere," Cassie said. "Others will be joining you shortly. There's water and food on the table there."

And she was gone. Lenny felt very nervous in the room alone. He eyed the guards uncertainly, before taking a seat at one of the dining tables. Within minutes, someone else entered, and though Lenny didn't know them all that well, he was at least familiar with him, having seen him around town.

He was a street cleaner, Lenny thought, though he wasn't certain. It was a friendly face, and he looked equally pleased to see Lenny too.

They didn’t talk about the test. They didn’t want to get in trouble for it. For all they knew, this might be part of the test too. But by the third and fourth people who joined them, they were ready to talk about what they’d experienced, both the similarities and differences.

The natural question became what was the test all about? Although they each had a theory, none of them knew the answer. Their own explanations were good enough for them.

As their number grew, they relaxed. There was safety in numbers. But as they would soon discover, there was one among them who it was certainly unwise to trust.

# 39.

IT TOOK all day, but eventually the family worked their way through each town member. Bryan was surprised to find not one person matched what they were looking for. They had a few suspects, but nothing concrete.

“Next,” Bryan said.

No one came in.

“Next!” Bryan said.

The boredom of repetition had made his temper short. Still no one came into the room. Zoe moved to the door, opened it, and peered into the corridor. Cassie spread her hands.

“That’s everyone,” she said.

“Everyone?” Bryan said. “It can’t be. Are you sure?”

“There’s no one else outside,” Cassie said.

Bryan fell back into a chair.

“After all this, we still don’t know if someone—if anyone—came from the surface,” he said.

“We have a few suspects,” Zoe said.

“No one concrete,” Bryan said.

“He must be a better actor than we thought,” Cassie said.

“There really isn’t anyone else left?” Bryan said.

Cassie shook her head.

“Then we’ve just wasted the whole town’s time without any good reason,” Bryan said. “How am I supposed to explain this to everyone? To the lord?”

Aaron’s eyes glinted.

“We haven’t checked them yet,” he said.

“Who?” Cassie said.

“The lord’s family,” Aaron said.

“The kids are too young,” Zoe said. “They wouldn’t qualify for the test anyway. No way a kid that age could pull something like this off.”

“But there is still the lord and lady,” Bryan said. “I suppose we should do them too, otherwise people would accuse us of favoritism.”

“Shall I go get them?” Zoe said.

“No,” Bryan said. “I’ll do it. If anyone should get the blame, it’s me.”

# 40.

“WE’VE ALMOST concluded the experiment,” Bryan said.

“Excellent,” Lord Maltese said, setting aside the book he’d been reading. “Any results? Can you tell me what this was all in aid of now?”

“I’m afraid not,” Bryan said. “At least, not yet. There are a couple more participants we have to examine.”

“Then you’d best get on with it, hadn’t you?” Lord Maltese said. “The sooner you finish, the sooner we can all get on with our lives.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” Bryan said.

“For what?” Lord Maltese said.

“To conclude the experiment,” Bryan said.

Lord Maltese’s eyes moved to the side in thought, and then snapped up as he realized what Bryan was saying.

“You’ve got some nerve,” he said. “You asked me to trust you, to run an experiment on the town, without telling me what it was you wanted to do, and this whole time you planned on subjecting my wife and I to the same test? I must insist you tell me what the purpose of the test is. Right this instant.”

“That would undermine the test,” Bryan said. “I don’t mean any offense. But if the people heard that you didn’t have to undergo the test, and they did, what kind of message do you think that would send them?”

The lord pursed his lips. He didn’t like it, but he couldn’t deny Bryan’s logic.

“We ought to just do the test,” Lady Maltese said, setting her knitting aside. “Get it over with.”

“Fine,” Lord Maltese said. “But I’ll go first. If I decide it’s something unsuitable for my lady wife, then I will refuse to let her take part.”

“Fair enough,” Bryan said. “But I can assure you, it is not something you need to worry about.”

“I’ll fetch the children,” Lady Maltese said.

“There’s no need,” Bryan said. “They’re too young to take the test.”

“At least we’re spared that much,” Lord Maltese said.

They followed Bryan out of their chambers and down the stairs to the corridor outside the test room.

“If you’ll take a seat,” Bryan said to Lady Maltese. “We won’t be a minute.”

Lady Maltese took a seat, careful to arrange her skirts around her.

“We will be parted but for a moment, my dear,” Lord Maltese said.

He turned the smile he aimed at his wife into a grim scowl as he entered the room. The lord folded his arms and appraised the room.

“So?” he said. “This is it? Four boxes on a table?”

“Yes,” Bryan said, taking his place behind the table. “If you’ll approach, please. As you can see, there are four boxes. What I want you to do is very simple. I’ll say a color, and you’ll open that box color. You’ll take out the object inside and, if you can, tell me what its purpose is.”

“Very well,” Lord Maltese said.

“Yellow,” Bryan said.

The lord approached the box and lifted the lid. His face registered surprise, followed by a frown, his eyebrows performing their full range of movement. He picked the object up. It was a cellphone, not that the lord knew that. He pressed the screen, the top and back. It was an alien object. There was no power, the battery long dead.

“What is this?” Lord Maltese said.

“That’s what you need to tell me,” Bryan said.

“I’m sure I have no idea,” Lord Maltese said. “A weapon of some kind?”

“Good guess,” Bryan said.

“I’m wrong?” Lord Maltese said.

“Yes,” Bryan said. “Though it could be used as a weapon, I suppose. In dire situations.”

“Have I passed the test?” Lord Maltese said.

“I’ll reveal the result in a moment in the great hall,” Bryan said.

Lord Maltese pressed his lips together.

“Very well,” he said.

He put the cellphone back in the box and replaced the lid. He turned on his heel and headed back toward the door to the corridor where his wife was waiting.

“Where are you going?” Bryan said.

“To tell my wife it’s nothing to be afraid of,” Lord Maltese said.

“I’m afraid you can’t go back out to speak with her,” Bryan said.

“Why ever not?” Lord Maltese said.

“It undermines the experiment,” Bryan said. “None of the others could go back through those doors. You can’t either.”

The lord’s eyes narrowed.

“This had better be worth it, that’s all I can say,” he said.

“It will be,” Bryan said, bluffing.

Lord Maltese left through the adjacent door and entered the main hall.

“What are we going to do?” Zoe said. “This is a nightmare.”

Their little test had been a colossal waste of time and effort. There was nothing they had learned from this experience, and with just Lady Maltese remaining, it looked like it wasn’t going to be useful after all. What was Bryan going to say when he addressed the people?

They would be angry. A mob might form. They were already annoyed at the family, blaming them for Cynthia’s murder, maybe even for Jeffrey’s death for all Bryan knew.

“We did our best,” Zoe said. “We’ll just have to face the music when the time comes.”

“Lady Maltese is still waiting in the hall,” Cassie said.

“Go get her,” Bryan said. “The sooner we get this over with, the better.”

Cassie moved to the door, opened it, and asked Lady Maltese to come in. She looked supremely confident when she entered—a far cry from the locals who they’d seen all day. That was what came with having power and authority, Bryan supposed. You grew used to wielding it, until it became a part of who you were as a person.

“Where do you want me?” Lady Maltese said.

“In front of the table, please,” Bryan said. “It’s very simple. I say a color, and you open the matching colored box. You tell me what the object inside is and its purpose, if you can.”

“Okay,” Lady Maltese said.

“Red,” Bryan said.

Lady Maltese moved to the box at the end and lifted the lid. She was surprised, her eyebrows rising. Then she smiled, her relief palpable. She reached inside and picked the item up. It was a digital watch. There was a crack on its face, but that didn’t remove its purpose.

“It has numbers on it,” Lady Maltese said. “So I’d guess something to do with counting?”

There was a pause.

“Thank you,” Bryan said. “That was excellent. Please go through to the great hall. We’ll be in shortly.”

“Was that it?” Lady Maltese said.

“Yes,” Bryan said. “That was all.”

Lady Maltese replaced the box’s top and crossed the room to the door and left.

The family were silent once she had gone. They were still taking in what had just happened.

# 41.

THE HALL quietened to silence as Bryan and his family took to the raised dais. Only their footsteps made any sound. Bryan wasn't quite sure how to proceed. He stood side-on to the crowd so he could address them as well as the lord and lady.

"Is your test complete?" Lord Maltese said.

"It is," Bryan said. "We have tested everyone of the appropriate age and we have discovered who we were looking for. But first, let us explain our process and how we went about it so you might all understand how we came to our final result."

Bryan took a deep breath to calm his nerves.

"It began with Jeffrey, the inventor," he said. "The fact someone so talented might exist here of all places was next to impossible."

"Why's that?" Roland said.

"Sorry?" Bryan said.

"Why was it next to impossible for someone like the inventor to exist down here?" Roland said.

It sounded confrontational, but really Roland was helping him. He didn't want the crowd to turn on Bryan just because of a few unexplained holes in his story.

"Thank you for the clarification question," Bryan said. "The answer is because here, there is a population of a thousand. On the surface we have billions, and even then, it took many hundreds of thousands of years for us to receive a person capable of what your inventor was—Isaac Newton.

"When faced with the problem of how planets moved around our sun not in a circle, but an inverted ellipse, he went away to his house for several months and came up with a completely new form of mathematics to explain it.

"We then had to wait several more hundred years before someone could greatly improve on his ideas—Albert Einstein. But even they could not see the future and build items related to it. I was taken in with Jeffrey's legend too, but what he reportedly did was actually impossible."

“Then how do you explain how the inventor could do these things?” Lord Maltese said. “Clearly he had some ability.”

“No,” Zoe said. “We now think someone else built these items and made it look like Jeffrey had come up with them.”

“Why would someone do that?” Lord Maltese said.

“To give themselves some protection,” Bryan said.

“Why would they do that?” Lord Maltese said. “Why wouldn’t they want to be known as a genius?”

“Because they’re not a genius,” Aaron said. “They’re an excellent engineer from the surface. That’s all.”

Murmurs broke out amongst the congregation.

“From the surface?” Abigail said. “Are you sure?”

“Very sure,” Bryan said. “That was why we had this experiment.”

“Why did you run the experiment the way you did?” Lady Maltese said. “I don’t see how it can show you much, beyond how creative the participant is at guessing the use of a given object.”

“Except, of course, that wasn’t what we were really testing,” Bryan said. “We didn’t care if the person could figure out what the use of their item was. That wasn’t our real test. We were testing something entirely different.”

“There wasn’t much else within the test, was there?” Lord Maltese said.

“On the face of it, no,” Bryan said. “But there was if you think back clearly. The real test was the participant’s reaction to what was in the box.”

“The person’s reaction?” Lord Maltese said.

“Yes,” Bryan said. “The human mind is exceptionally good at distinguishing emotions. We might disagree with very subtle emotions, but the big explosive ones—anger, happiness, confusion etc—are almost always universally agreed. That was why there were four of us, the whole family, in the room. We were each gauging the participant’s reaction to the item in the box. If we all agreed what the emotion was—which we almost universally did—then we knew who we were looking for and who we could safely ignore.

“There were a couple of participants in this very hall who we considered potentials for having come from the surface. Why? Because their expressions were not what we were expecting. They may very well have shown surprise at what was in the box, who wouldn’t with the futuristic fantasy objects we’d put in there?

But it was the reaction to that surprise that we were really looking for. How did they feel about being surprised? Angry? Confused? Those emotions would have been totally understandable given the situation. But relief? Satisfaction? Happiness? These are not likely. And that is what we used to identify the person from the surface."

"Why didn't you just ask everyone?" Lord Maltese said. "I'm sure the person from the surface would have admitted where they came from."

"No," Bryan said. "We don't believe they would. They're so used to hiding in plain sight, so used to acting, that we would never have been able to identify them, not without the latest in detection technology from the surface. We just had us."

"Then who is it?" Lord Maltese said. "Save us the suspense and reveal to us who this mysterious surfacer is, who has so successfully been hiding amongst us all these years."

"Very well," Bryan said. "But the result might come as quite a shock."

He took a deep breath and turned to face the lord's family. Finally his eyes shifted to the figure sitting beside the lord in her high backed throne-like chair.

"It's Lady Maltese," Bryan said.

# 42.

A DEATHLY silence filled the great hall. You could have heard a pin drop. One thousand pairs of eyes turned as one to look at the Lady Maltese, whose face was carved from stone.

The lord smacked his fists on the armrests of his armchair and got to his feet.

“This is outrageous!” he said. “We give you food, lodging, the use of our guards and our great hall, and you accuse my wife, Lady Maltese, of being from the surface? She and her family have been here for generations! Her family can be traced right back to the very origins of our town. Why, if you go to England on the surface I’m sure you’ll find she has evidence of her roots going back even farther.”

“Yes,” Bryan said. “I believe you.”

“Then why are you pointing the finger of accusation at my beloved?” Lord Maltese said.

“Because she may not originally be from her noble house,” Bryan said. “She may have taken the original noble daughter’s position in the household, may have usurped her place, all in an effort to take control of the town. She is from the surface. She is the one with the engineering abilities.

“Do you think me a fool?” Lord Maltese said. “Don’t you think I would have noticed—that someone would have noticed—if my lady was from the surface?”

“You don’t find what you’re not looking for,” Bryan said.

“How would she even be able to do what you say?” Lord Maltese said. “She runs a household. She does not have the time to design such things, even if she were capable.”

“She retires every day, does she not?” Zoe said, stepping forward. “To her chambers, where she likes to be alone to sit and contemplate. And knit. She showed me some of her knitting once. I was astonished. I’ve never seen a faultless piece of work like that before. It was unlike anything a human can do, without fault.

“It was made by a machine. She will have it hidden in her chambers somewhere, I’m sure. She put it on while she sneaked out of her rooms and into Jeffrey’s tower, plying him with alcohol laced with a sedative, to send him to sleep. She encouraged him to draw what he dreamed, but they were normal dreams, and of little meaning. Simple lumps and shapes we’ve all had over the years.

“Meanwhile, she drew the detailed designs. She even made them. All while Jeffrey slept. And when she was done, she returned to her chambers, where she put away the knitting machine and took up the needles. She never really knitted a single stitch. All this could be forgiven, of course. A little harmless covering up. We could all understand that.

“But it’s not all she’s done over the years. She killed Jeffrey, no doubt in an attempt to conceal her tracks, by letting Jeffrey take the fall for the murder, just as he had taken credit for her inventions. But it was she who killed Cynthia in town, all to distract attention from the dragon she either installed here or simply manipulated.

“We’re not sure how she did that, how she brought the T-Rex here from another world, or if it was blind luck the dinosaur came here at the same time she did, but in either case, she took full advantage of it. She altered the dinosaur so it could breathe fire, to make it more of a danger to this town with its wooden walls. She controls the monster somehow, perhaps via an implant in its brain. Such things aren’t unheard of on the surface.”

“I don’t believe that,” Lord Maltese said. “Any of it.”

“You don’t have to believe me,” Bryan said. “Look at your wife.”

The lord seemed unable to do so, afraid of what he might see on her face. Bryan felt sorry for him. What if there was confirmation on her features? What if she nodded and it showed him who she truly was? What if all these years had been a sham and a farce, an act, that she never really loved him. And the children…

The children.

They would be the greatest tragedy of all, conceived in a web of lies. They would be the living embodiment of her manipulation. Despite the difficulty, Lord Maltese finally began to turn and face his lady.

His expression turned stone cold and pale.

Lady Maltese had a small smile on her face, a smile that had no place on her delicate features. The family was right. She was from the surface.

# 43.

“THIS CAN’T be true,” Lord Maltese said. “Please tell me it’s not true.”

“It’s true,” Lady Maltese said.

The lord gave a whimper and staggered back. Someone might have planted a blade in his ribs. He looked at Lady Maltese like he’d never seen her before. Perhaps he hadn’t, at least not the real her.

Lady Maltese shifted her speech pattern, what Zoe suspected was her true accent. She recognized it as somewhere on the upper east coast.

“My lady,” Lord Maltese said. “Why are you talking like that?”

“Because it’s my real voice, you fool,” Lady Maltese said. “Don’t you recognize truth when you hear it? I’m forgetting. Of course you don’t.”

The lord stumbled back again, as if struck by a fierce blow.

“I love you,” he said.

“That’s what happens when one casts the spell of infatuation upon another, is it not?” Lady Maltese said. “The irrational inability to see what’s right in front of their noses.”

“But… how?” Lord Maltese said.

“How could I outwit a simpleton such as yourself?” Lady Maltese said. “With great ease, as it turned out. How could I outwit the nitwits living in this town? With even greater ease. The real difficulty was trying not to lose my own wits in this place.”

The locals watched the scene like it was the climax to their favorite play. They were silent, gawping as the scene unfolded. The main players were the lord’s family, the most revered family in the whole town. To watch this play out was both fascinating and heartbreaking at the same time.

“But… why?” Lord Maltese said.

“Because on the surface, my whole life I’d been a nothing,” Lady Maltese said. “There’s no way I was going to let myself be a nothing down here too.”

“But you’re an engineer,” Lord Maltese said. “The things you can do… You could have been famous.”

“And still looked down on by my social superiors,” Lady Maltese said. “There is always somebody better. Never forget that. There is always somebody better to look down on you and sneer. I wasn’t going to put up with that any longer. I was going to be top dog down here, and no one was going to stop me from doing it. No one.”

“But how couldn’t someone recognize you for who you were?” Zoe said. “Someone would have noticed someone new turning up here. Just like they all knew we weren’t from here originally. Especially someone in your position—as a lady.”

“Which is why I had to be so careful,” Lady Maltese said. “The hardest part was getting that first job. Almost all work comes by reference. And so I had to befriend some of the locals, for them to assume who I was, who my family were. But that couldn’t last forever. I needed something more solid, more concrete if I was to climb the social ladder.

“But my story actually begins far from here, up on the surface. You can’t know what it is to want more than you have—really want more than you have—when you have nothing to begin with.

“You are right, I was an engineer on the surface. A good one, as it turns out. But I was nothing more. I wasn’t a wife, a mother, nor even a daughter after my parents were taken from me in a car crash the previous summer. I met men, but they used me and then became disinterested, wishing never to see me again. I was about ready to throw it all in, to toss myself off the building I was then working on. But there was a builder who spoke to me, talked me down. He smiled at me. A warm smile, and I was captivated by him.

“He took me to dinner, not at expensive restaurants—he couldn’t afford it, but I didn’t care for food anyway. I slept with him. And he was still there by the next morning. We saw each other often. And then, one day, he stopped calling me. I met him on the building site, but he was terse.

“I later found out the other builders knew about us, and he was embarrassed because I was his boss. I told him it didn’t matter to me, that only he mattered, that I loved him. But it didn’t matter. He’d already made up his mind. He wouldn’t see me again.

“I was so embarrassed. I thought he liked me. I felt a flash of anger then, not at myself, which was usually the case, but at him. I wanted to kill him, to stab him in the chest and tear out his heart just as he had torn out mine! It was the first, but certainly not the last, time I felt such powerful

emotions. I wanted the ground to swallow me up, and it did, though not right then.

“I was making my plans to gut him. I had my knife and I was going to blindly stab him in the chest while no one was around. I was going to tear him to pieces, but it wasn’t to be, as, the night I was waiting for him outside his local drinking hole, I stood in wait in the shadows, and just when I was going to make my move, I felt a sudden pang of guilt.

“Could I do this, I wondered. Could I take someone’s life? And I hesitated. But it did not change my mind. I could do this, and furthermore, I would do it. I would do it in a way that they would write about in the newspapers, and I didn’t even care if I was caught. But I never got to carry out that first act of vengeance. The ground opened up and swallowed me whole.

“I ended up here, in this backward world. I was depressed when I first arrived, not recognizing it for the opportunity it represented. I dug, using tools when I could, my hands when they broke. I was demented with desperation. I thought I’d been punished and sent to hell for what I was planning on carrying out. Then I realized just how much of an advantage it could prove to be someone from the future.

“I wiped out an entire family in order to fill that blank space of my backstory. I became Judy, the eldest daughter of a poor family on the outskirts of town, the only survivor of a savage attack. The town will remember the murder of the Moseleys. Ostracized and forgotten by this town, they provided me with the ideal opportunity to set myself up as a part of your town. I’ve always had a skill with accents, not that it ever proved more useful than a cheap party trick in the past. But now, finally, it might be of use.

“The townsfolk turned on each other, eventually finding the killer in the mad but harmless local Potty. He wasn’t guilty, of course, but he fit the roll of a savage killer easily enough, especially when I gave them the eyewitness testimony the prosecutors so desperately needed. And then it was a simple matter of hanging him. In my quieter moments I find myself thinking I saw the flash of realization in his eyes as the rope tightened. But of course, he was unable to speak, even without the rope around his neck.

“Potty was quite mad, useless to the town. He became like a mascot. I did everyone a favor—including the luckless Potty—by having him put down. And in his death, I was reborn. I was given the position of

chambermaid in the noble Marsh family's castle, who took pity on me. It matters little how lowly a position one holds at the beginning of a career, I find. It matters only how lofty a situation one ends up.

"And there was only one position I had my eye on: that of lady of the town. And I saw my opportunity in the ridiculous, but well-meaning clause that haunts every lord: that any member of the town may take the lord's position. But there was a catch, if one checks the small print. Anyone wishing to ascend must at least be married to a noble of sufficient rank. It was a wrinkle, but a minor one.

"I was struck with luck as I had a more than passing resemblance to the daughter of Lord Marsh. Even the young Lady Marsh noticed. She used me on several occasions to dress in her clothes and attend events as herself, events she had no interest at all in attending. She never knew she was lining the innards of her own coffin when she did that.

"I took full advantage of the situation and used the opportunity to practice my impression of the young lady, even going so far as to assume her mannerisms and speech patterns. She was more than thrilled with my performance, and even gave me pointers on how I might improve. I did not require her directions. I pretended to incorporate them in any case. It's remarkable how people see themselves in comparison to how others really see them, don't you think? It's always likely to be less flattering than one expects.

"And so, there I was, with the means and ability to take the young lady's position and social status. What is a young ambitious lady to do when so freely given the tools she requires to carry out her plans? The wealth and power I'd always desired were close at hand. The young lady met her end with the sharp business side of a shovel.

"A small, but tender funeral was held for the unfortunate Judy Moseley, the last of her name. She had lived more in the past year than she had the previous thirty. Now it was the young Lady Marsh's turn.

"My new adopted mother recognized something different about me, of course. She was born with more brains than her daughter. But she also recognized the need for someone to take her daughter's place, or else have to wait another generation and hope her daughter's offspring wouldn't be as dim as her own.

"Real change never comes from within. It comes from outside, from the ostracized, from the downtrodden. Because someone, eventually, rises up

and tells everyone what they don't want to hear, what they don't want to know. And sometimes they say it without even needing to open their mouths at all. The lady knew that. Though she never condoned it, she never punished me either.

"Next, I needed a partner. My surrogate mother introduced me to many men of noble birth and I found them all to be powdered boys, not men. The town would look to a man, a real man. He needed the appearance of a tough leader, even if he wasn't one. And he needn't be of high birth. I could now provide the required title. It took some convincing on my part for my new mother to accept, but eventually she acquiesced.

"I discovered my future husband in the stables. I'd know him for quite some time when I was a chambermaid, though we never conversed much. He was a hard worker, his silhouette chiseled, and I admit I felt more than a stirring of my loins whenever I looked upon him. Yes, it was partially for selfish reasons that I chose him. I bedded him to ensure he knew what he was doing between the sheets—the one requirement I needed of him.

"I decided to play the role of the shy girl who shows her true colors only in the bedroom. It was a stereotype, but as we all know, stereotypes exist for a reason. It worked like a charm. And when he began to come to me, at first creeping in through my window at night, I rationed out what I did to him, so he would always be thinking about what he would receive next time, and the next time, and the time after that, until eventually he was wrapped around my little finger tighter than a worm on a hook.

"Convinced he would do whatever I bid of him, I told him I loved him, that my heart was full of him and I needed to have him as my husband. He had his reservations, but he agreed. We were going to challenge the lord for control of this world, when I realized we would not have won the support we required if we wanted to overthrow it and bring it under our power.

"And it was then that he came, a dark angel. A cloaked figure, who promised me I could achieve everything I wanted, and more. He would provide me with the need for a new lord to arise, and in return, he wanted me to work on something for him. A piece of machinery. I agreed.

"The next day, we heard tales of a monster coming from the caves and snatching people in the middle of the night. And as time went by, it became clear: there really was a monster. And it was then that I realized what the cloaked figure had done.

“He said he would provide the town with a need to change our leadership, and that was exactly what he’d provided. I needed to upgrade the monster of course, but that was easy enough. The hardest part was fitting it to the great beast. But after some work, I finally figured that out too.”

“But the monster,” Bryan said. “How did you control it?”

“Anything can be taught to do anything,” Lady Maltese said. “A lion to dance, a baboon to sing, a snake to fly, so long as you give them the tools and enough will. Anything is capable of anything.”

“I can’t believe this,” Lord Maltese said. “I won’t believe it.”

“Believe it,” Lady Maltese said. “It’s the truth. I’m not the victim anymore.”

“Lady Maltese, please,” Lord Maltese said with a haunted expression on his face. “You’ve achieved so much down here with us. I’m proud of you, of everything you’ve done. You can come back to us, you can come back to me and our family. Everything will be all right again. Please.”

Lady Maltese reached for the lord’s outstretched hand, and then she turned and saw the expressions on the faces of the townsfolk. There was no way they were going to let her get away with what she’d done. The murders. The lies. The mayhem. She would be strung up and decapitated.

Shouting in the corridor snapped her from her reverie. Clacking noises like weapons striking the walls. What it could be, Bryan had no idea, but he knew it couldn’t be good.

“You’re right about me, of course,” Lady Maltese said. “But you made a grievous mistake when you brought all the people here today. Doing so meant you left only a small skeleton force on the walls to defend us. Or should I say my skeleton force?”

“Mother…” Abigail said. “Please. Take me with you.”

Lady Maltese’s resolve seemed to break, only for an instant, but it was there. And then it was gone, like dust in a strong wind. It may not have existed at all.

“You are no longer required,” Lady Maltese said. “You have served your purpose. Goodbye. And farewell.”

“Mother!” Abigail said. “No! Please!”

The doors to the great hall burst open, and skinny figures stepped into the light. The townspeople screamed. These things, like many other things of late, were not from this world.

# 44.

THE FIGURES stepped into the warm fuzzy light of the candles burning on the walls. The townsfolk took a collective step back and a deep breath in. The figures wore grins, many missing teeth. They held an amalgamation of weapons in their tight fists, chipped and worn, bloodied and dangerous already.

They were skeletons, with blinking red lights acting as their beating hearts. Bryan recognized them as the skeletons the dragon had stripped of their flesh and left to hang on the line. There had been dozens of them, Bryan recalled. And here they all were, reanimated and brought back to life.

One of the skeletons took a step forward, his bones rattling and making crunching noises. His movements were not smooth, but jerky and uncontrolled. He turned his head to one side and peered menacingly at the locals.

The locals reacted the only way any sane person would have: they screamed and scattered, running for the doors to either side of the room. They worked together to shift the heavy lumps of wood. But opening them was a mistake, as even more of the rattling skeleton soldiers stepped forth.

How had these things been reanimated and told to come here? Bryan thought. During Lady Maltese's whole monologue she had never mentioned she had an accomplice. And Bryan didn't believe she had one now. Which meant it must have been some kind of device on her person that allowed her to contact and control her undead soldiers of fortune.

Bryan looked Lady Maltese over. She was decked out in jewelry. It could have been anything she wore, anything could be used to control these undead characters. Bryan eyed her, watching her, to see if she touched any of the jewelry on her person.

Bryan ran for her. Lady Maltese leapt off the dais and landed amongst the people. She pressed at the amulet hanging from her neck. Bryan could see that by pressing the jewels on its surface they acted like rudimentary buttons.

"Someone stop her!" Bryan said.

Lady Maltese grinned. She turned and ran among the commoners, who seemed more afraid of her than the undead soldiers, pulling back. The former lady ran through them to a side door and out into the corridors where her skeleton warriors were arranged in uniform lines. The skeletons parted, making room for her to pass through, before closing the gap behind her.

The braver individuals among the locals stepped forward to engage her but they were too slow, pulling back and skidding to a stop before the skeleton warriors, who didn't budge an inch. The people needed a leader. Bryan turned to Lord Maltese.

The lord sat on the side of the dais with his head in his hands, his legs hanging over the side. He was broken and destroyed by his wife's revelation. He would be of no use to any escape attempt they made. Worse, he might be a hindrance. Bryan felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry," Roland said. "Despite all my mother has done, she would never allow the common folk to be hurt by these skeleton warriors of hers."

A reanimated corpse lurched forward and, armed with a wicked scimitar, sliced open the large belly of a thick-chested man. Roland removed his hand from Bryan's shoulder, clearly shocked.

"It appears she has fewer scruples than you thought," Bryan said.

Roland turned pale. Bryan gripped him by the shoulders.

"Your father is a broken wreck," Bryan said. "You have to take charge."

"Right," Roland said distantly. "Uh, what would you suggest we do?"

"Tell the people to grab armor, chairs, anything, and use them as weapons," Bryan said.

"Right," Roland said. "Good suggestion."

He straightened up and addressed the moaning locals, who were distraught at what faced them.

"As the eldest and only son of the great lord-" he said, his voice barely audible.

"Just hurry up and do it!" Cassie said. "Stop wasting time!"

She ran to a wall and pulled at a sword attached to a decorative display. It thunked to the floor, but was thankfully not just for display purposes. She tossed one sword to Roland and kept the other for herself. The rest of the family did likewise, grabbing at weapons held by suits of armor.

Roland looked at his sword and held it above his head.

“People!” he said. “Hear me! Today we face a demon more deadly and dangerous than anything we’ve ever faced before! You must fight if you wish to survive. The time for peace is over. We must vanquish these foes and send them back to hell where they belong!”

The locals pushed their chairs over and snapped the legs off. They turned to face the skeleton soldiers, homemade cudgels in hand. Others leapt onto the dining tables, kicking off the empty plates set for the evening meal.

The guards were slow in reacting, but now they were stepping up to the plate, facing the skeletons headon. They were afraid—their training certainly hadn’t prepared them for this—but they were ready to do what needed to be done. Their job was to protect, and that was precisely what they were going to do.

“Men!” Roland said. “Let’s send these bags of bones back to hell where they belong!”

He ran forward, his sword raised.

From that moment, all hell broke loose.

The skeleton soldiers moved in an awkward, disorienting manner. Their joints were loose and seemed to stretch farther than they were originally designed for. Their faces were terrifying, lit by the red pulsing glow in their chests.

But they lacked the training the guards had with their weapons. Whatever knowledge and skill the previous occupants of the bodies had before was no longer in their possession. They were no better with their weapons than the untrained locals were, but they had an advantage: they were not incapacitated with fear.

Bryan swung his cudgel at a skeleton, caving in its skull. The skeleton continued to swing with its chipped sword. Bryan ducked to avoid the blow. He kicked the skeleton with the sole of his boot.

The skeleton fell back, but it was up again in an instant, performing an odd movement that resulted in its feet returning to the floor first, then its shins, its knees and thigh bones, until it was standing upright.

“I feel like I’m in Simon and the Argonauts,” Bryan said.

“Simon and the what?” Cassie said, slashing at her own skeleton.

“Remind me to educate you on American culture when we get home,” Bryan said.

“If it looks something like them, you can keep it,” Cassie said.

Bryan swung his cudgel like Babe Ruth, knocking the creature's head from its shoulders. Its whole body rocked with the blow, its head flying through the air. It turned to face Bryan again, headless. But it didn't seem to make much difference to the skeleton. If you were as good without your head as with it, what was the point?

The skeleton lurched forward again, this time finding its way past Bryan's defenses, knocking Bryan to the floor. Bryan struggled to wriggle free. He pushed at the bones on top of him. It was not heavy, but difficult to maintain a grip.

The skeleton reached over to grab its chipped sword and raised it high above its head, its beeping red heart visible through its ribs. Bryan was too fearful to respond, and held his arms over his head. He was doomed.

But the blow never came. Instead, the skeleton's lifeless—and this time, really lifeless—body fell on top of Bryan.

A hand reached down and helped Bryan to his feet. The hand was small, but strong. It was ice cold, and for a moment Bryan wondered if perhaps he'd grabbed a skeleton's hand by mistake.

"You have to destroy their hearts," his rescuer said. "Or what passes for their heart. Tell me Bryan, were you one of these creatures once?"

"Rosetta?" Bryan said. "What are you doing here?"

# 45.

“I’M FINE thanks,” Rosetta said. “How are you?”

Bryan tentatively reached out and put his hands on Rosetta’s shoulders. He couldn’t believe it. She was real.

“Rosetta?” Bryan said.

“The one and only,” Rosetta said.

Bryan wrapped his arms around her, drawing her close.

“I can’t believe it’s really you!” he said. “For a minute there I thought I’d lost my mind. Are there more of you? Is there a rescue team down here?”

“There is a rescue team,” Rosetta said with a nod. “It’s the same underpaid, overworked rescue team you’ve always had. Me.”

“I’m so pleased to see you,” Bryan said. “But how did you get here?”

“Don’t dock my wages for insubordination,” Rosetta said, “but don’t you think we should worry about these undead fellows before having this discussion?”

“Of course,” Bryan said.

The locals looked at Rosetta uncertainly at first, gawping at her metal arm. They seemed unsure whether she was one of the monsters they were meant to be fighting or not. But once they saw her in action, tearing the undead apart, it soon became obvious whose side she was on.

Rosetta’s robot arm turned out to be just what they needed. It was the skeleton warriors’ Achilles’ Heel. Rosetta ran at the undead, blocking their attack with her metal arm before thrusting her hand into their chest cavities, grasping the blinking red box, and ripping it free.

She repeated the procedure over and over, the metal of her arm breaking the flimsy metal of the middle ages. She needed the support from the locals, and they were happy to give it to her, just as long as they didn’t need to be on the front line.

“That’s funny,” Rosetta said.

“What is?” Bryan said.

“Usually it’s me that’s getting my heart ripped out,” Rosetta said.

“Remind me to set you up with some of my friends when we get back,” Bryan said.

“They’re the ones I’m talking about,” Rosetta said.

“Then consider them unfriended,” Bryan said.

Thanks to Rosetta they were making good headway through the skeleton horde.

“You seem to have this sorted out,” Bryan said.

“You’re about to leave now, right?” Rosetta said. “As usual. Just when it’s starting to get interesting.”

“Can you hold the fort?” Bryan said. “And keep pushing the advantage?”

“There are still a whole lot of these beasties out there,” Rosetta said. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Bryan smiled. Rosetta’s best was always more than enough.

“And Rosetta,” Bryan said.

“Huh?” Rosetta said.

“It’s great to see you,” Bryan said.

Rosetta grinned, before it evaporated into her customary scowl.

“Get out of here, you big softie,” she said, turning back to the skeleton horde. “These worlds have had a bad influence on you.”

You could accuse Rosetta of being many things, but being a softie was certainly not one of them.

# 46.

THE FAMILY came running out of the castle. There were two skeletons on their tail. They turned to deal with them, sending their bones sprawling across the steps.

“How are we going to stop all these monsters?” Zoe said. “The skeletons won’t stop. Not while they have power to move.”

“There must be an antennae,” Bryan said. “I saw Lady Maltese using some kind of device to control the skeletons. It must be what she uses to control the dinosaur too.”

“A what?” Cassie said.

“An antennae,” Bryan said. “For Lady Maltese’s device to send its signal. Without it she wouldn’t be able to tell them what to do.”

“Great,” Zoe said. “Except I’ve never seen an antennae here! And it would stand out in a town like this, don’t you think?”

“I’ve seen one,” Aaron said. “Or what might be one.”

“Where?” Bryan said.

“On the roof of the tallest tower in the castle—the inventor’s tower,” Aaron said.

Bryan turned to look at the statue of the dragon being vanquished by Saint George. It was an odd shape, and now that he looked at it, it did look a bit like an antennae with its protruding appendages.

“That’s it,” Bryan said.

“We’ll destroy it,” Cassie said, nodding to herself and Aaron.

“Will we?” Aaron said.

“We’ll destroy the antennae while you catch Lady Maltese,” Cassie said.

Aaron ran the two options through his mind. He knew which one was safest and the least likely to get him killed.

“Right,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“Wait,” Zoe said. “We don’t even know where Lady Maltese is. She could be anywhere.”

Cassie shook her head and gave Zoe a friendly roll of her eyes.

“There can only be one place she could be,” Cassie said. “The one place the locals would never go, where she had a T-Rex defending all this time.”

“The caves,” Zoe said.

Cassie and Aaron turned and ran toward the inventor’s tower. Bryan watched them with pride.

“You have to admit, we did a great job in raising them,” he said.

“I’ll certainly agree with that,” Zoe said. “Even if they are a handful at times.”

“Looks like a handful is what we need,” Bryan said

He was looking at the smoldering remains of the town’s west wall. Whatever was on the other side could breathe white-hot fire. The wall wouldn’t last much longer.

“It looks like we’re about to get a whole much of handfuls as we speak,” Zoe said.

The creature’s bright green crest was visible over the wall. A giant eye peered through an arrow slit. If Bryan hadn’t know better, he would have said the monster was smiling at him. It took a step back, threw its weight against the wall that was already leaning dangerously inward, before finally giving up the ghost and falling forward.

# 47.

CASSIE AND AARON ascended the spiral staircase in record time. It was a good thing it was them who had to run up the stairs, as Cassie was sure Bryan would have died before making it to the top.

She really needed to get him to join a gym when they got back to the surface. Aaron, on the other hand, must have developed a few muscles during their adventure beneath the surface. If he kept it up she was sure he could perform very well in sports at school.

They got to the top. Cassie's eyes immediately went to the spot on the floor where they had found the inventor's dead body. It was gone now, and every attempt had been made to scrub the blood stains from the stone, but the cleaners had failed. The stains were faint, but still there.

She tore her eyes away and surveyed the room, rising to the ceiling. They needed to get on the roof somehow, so they might destroy the antennae.

But how?

Cassie searched amongst the detritus and half-built inventions. She came out with a length of rope.

"What are you doing?" Aaron said.

"Fancy a trip up Memory Lane?" Cassie said.

"Not really," Aaron said.

"Tough," Cassie said. "We're going to relive our time in the magma world and climbing from the nest. But instead of climbing down, we'll be climbing up."

"Goodie," Aaron said, shoulders slumping.

# 48.

BRYAN HAD been in situations like this before: knowing what needed to be done, but having no idea how they were meant to carry it out. Admittedly those times never featured a giant reptile that was meant to be extinct, although Mr. Myers, a former business partner, did have traits similar to the great king of the dinosaurs. They needed to get it away from the town, but they had no plan.

"We'll never outrun it," Zoe said.

"So what?" Bryan said. "Just leave it here. We only need to get into the caves and find the Passage. Then we can get out of here."

"While the kids are still in the town, in the tallest tower?" Zoe said.

"Good point," Bryan said. "What do you suggest we do?"

*Neigh!*

It was a nervous chattering sound, punctuated with solid thumps on a thick door.

"The horses," Zoe said.

They ran to the castle's stables and found the horses inside. They were stirring, nervous with the approaching monster.

"We should let them out, don't you think?" Bryan said.

"We'll lead the dinosaur away so it won't bother these horses anymore," Zoe said. "We just need two horses. Let's see…"

She moved along the line and found what she considered to be the two best horses in the stables. She opened the stable door and put her hands to the first horse, a large black stallion. Lord Maltese's own horse. She calmed him down. He grunted against her hands, but soon quietened. Zoe led him out of the stable and put his saddle on.

"You take him," Zoe said.

She prepared a beautiful brown gelding for herself—the same she'd ridden several times already. It was calm at the sight of her. She climbed on.

"Now what?" Bryan said.

"Now we lead the dinosaur away," Zoe said.

"How?" Bryan said.

“You’ll get its attention first and lead it out of town,” Zoe said. “I’ll head out now, close to the woodland where we first entered when we got here. By the time you get to me, I’ll be rested and ready to run. Then the dinosaur will chase me.”

“Like a relay race,” Bryan said. “But what do we do with the dinosaur in the end? We can’t just get it to chase us all the time.”

“We won’t need to,” Zoe said. “Is your trap still set up from when you tried to capture it before?”

“Yes,” Bryan said.

“Then that’s what we’ll lead him toward,” Zoe said. “He’ll spring the trap, and he’ll be caught.”

“Wait,” Bryan said. “I just thought of something.”

“I guessed that at your exclamation of ‘Wait’,” Zoe said. “What is it?”

“What makes you think the dinosaur will even chase me?” Bryan said. “There’s plenty around here for him to eat.”

Zoe had the audacity to smile.

“Because a predator never forgets prey that escaped him,” she said.

Bryan thought back to the crazy, near-mad look on the dinosaur’s face when the family had made it to the town. It had been murderous…

And now Bryan was about to put himself on the menu.

Zoe kissed Bryan on the lips.

“See you in a bit,” she said. “Be careful.”

She smacked her gelding’s rump and they shot forward into the street. She took a hard left, in the opposite direction to where the dinosaur was.

“Be careful!” Bryan said.

He shook his head and chuckled to himself.

“That’s a laugh,” he said.

# 49.

AARON COMPLAINED, but there was little he could do. They needed to get to the top of the roof, and besides climbing up and destroying it by hand, there was no other way of doing it. Luckily, Aaron was on board. He was the one with all the ideas.

Aaron surveyed the equipment and half-built inventions lying on the floor and strewn across the tables. Piles of items in various stages of the creative process.

Aaron snapped off some of these pieces, and attached it to another piece, before winding it all off with the thick wire and rope. He worked on autopilot, having already memorized where all the pieces were.

*I have* got *to get my memory into better shape*, Cassie thought. But that was an idea for later. If there was a later. First she needed to get to the roof. Now was her time to shine.

Aaron handed what he'd made to Cassie. She was the sporty person, the action hero. She looked at what he'd handed her. It was a length of rope with a long stick threaded sideways.

"What's this for?" Cassie said. "It looks like something a trapeze artist would use."

"It's for you to throw over the tower," Aaron said. "It's wide so it's easier for me to catch, and I can brace it on this side of the window in case you fall."

"Got all bases covered I see," Cassie said.

"You never know," Aaron said.

Cassie approached the window, while Aaron crossed to the opposite side.

"Ready?" Cassie said, holding the stick in one hand and the length of rope in the other.

"Wait," Aaron said.

He cast about and identified what he was looking for: a large net that reminded Cassie of a dreamcatcher. Aaron snapped it off and moved toward the opposite window, holding the net outside.

"Okay," he said, nodding to Cassie.

“Here we go,” Cassie said.

She would throw it too high, she decided. It was better to get it over the roof than to get it stuck on something. She stood on the window’s ledge, bracing herself with the hand holding the coil of rope. She moved her arm up and down, judging the distance and how hard she needed to throw the object.

She pulled her arm back and released the stick. It looped up high, as high as Cassie had been able to throw it, but she knew the moment it had left her hand that the angle was off.

“It’s not going to come down directly at you,” Cassie said. “Sorry.”

“Which side do you think it will come down at?” Aaron said, looking out of the window and trying to see where the stick was.

“On your right,” Cassie said.

Aaron held his net out, preparing to catch the weight. There was a thud on the roof, and then a sliding sound like something was skidding across the roof tiles. A few of the tiles came loose and fell into Aaron’s net, passing through the gaps and falling to the ground below. Cassie hoped the holes wouldn’t let the stick pass through too.

Cassie’s rope had ceased unspooling. The stick was up on the roof somewhere. And then it began unwinding again. That was a relief. She would have had to have pulled the rope back and tried again.

“Here it comes!” Cassie said.

Aaron had to lean over at an extreme angle out of the window in order to be within reach of it, utilizing his legs as placeholders. The weight tried to drag him over, but he held on and pulled back.

“Got it?” Cassie said.

Aaron grunted, not saying a word. He gradually pulled himself back inside, inch by inch. Cassie wanted to dash forward to help him, but doing so meant letting go of the rope she held in her hands. She couldn’t risk losing it.

Aaron pulled himself back inside and held the stick in his hands.

“I’ve got it,” he said, mildly out of breath.

Aaron turned the stick sideways so it was supported on both sides of the window. He picked up more sticks and wound them around the rope, securing it and making it stronger. It was a load-bearing weight and could easily take Cassie’s weight.

“Well, here we go,” Cassie said.

She gripped the rope and was about to climb when Aaron picked up a length of wood—what look like the leg of a polished coffee table—and handed it to her.

“What’s this for?” Cassie said.

“You didn’t intend on smashing the antennae with your hands, did you?” Aaron said.

“Good point,” Cassie said.

She took the makeshift cudgel and attached it to her belt. She turned to the rope and began to pull herself up. After the adventure in the snake’s nest, her muscles had grown strong. She reached up and pulled herself onto the roof with ease.

Now she was on the roof, the antennae—if that was what it was—was within swinging distance. She crouched to lower her center of gravity and edged toward the statue. It was a beautiful thing. It seemed a shame to smash it to pieces. But that was what had to be done. She raised her weapon to begin her reign of destruction.

*SMASH!*

It hadn’t come from Cassie swinging her weapon, but behind her. Something had caused a great deal more damage to a building on the other side of the castle wall than Cassie could do over the course of weeks, and it had done it in seconds. She stood frozen, her arm raised, and slowly turned to look out the corner of her eye at the creature behind her.

It was the T-Rex. And Cassie was at perfect chomping height.

Cassie froze. If the dinosaur turned it might catch her scent. And she would be doomed. She stood there, legs shaking, frozen in position. She was in a low squat position, body bent double under the pressure and weight of her own body. It was the worst possible position to be in. The sweat dripped down her face.

There was a whinnying sound on Cassie’s right, down on the street.

*No*, Cassie thought, and would have screamed if she wasn’t right at the dinosaur’s ear. The dinosaur straightened up, even closer to her position now, and looked down at the lone horseman.

Cassie could smell the monster’s reeking breath. She turned her head to look away, to block the stench, but she daren’t turn too far or fast for fear of getting the beast’s attention. The dinosaur growled in the back of its throat. The growl of something hungry, and not just for food, but for vengeance.

Cassie felt relieved. Whoever the lone warrior was, he had just saved not only her and Aaron’s life, for the monster would have surely brought the entire tower down, but he would have also torn through the great hall, pulverizing the locals to mush.

Her heart lurched in her throat as the dinosaur gave chase to the rider. The awkward angle of the rider caught her eye. He was no hero from the fairytales. He was a hero from real life.

He was her father.

# 50.

BRYAN COULDN’T recall feeling so scared his whole life. But then again, he’d felt like that often these days. He dreaded to think the grey hairs this whole experience would give him.

He was playing chicken with a dinosaur, and not just any dinosaur, but the most feared and terrible dinosaur in the history of the world. The T-Rex. The one all dinosaurs feared. And he was facing him on a horse, making himself an even more delicious target.

When Bryan had emerged onto the street, in full view of the dinosaur at the opposite end, it had been busying itself with smashing a clutch of homes to pieces. It breathed on the rubble, melting it to molten lava-like flows. It pressed its weight on top of the rubble with its giant feet, crushing it. It seemed to find enjoyment in doing it.

Thankfully no one was inside the house. They were all inside the great hall. They were still fighting for their lives, but what chance would they have had against this giant mass of muscle?

*Probably about the same as me*, Bryan thought.

Bryan’s horse was skittish. Bryan couldn’t blame it. He was scared too. But they were a healthy distance away. The horse was well trained and obeyed Bryan’s commands even when he told it to stand its ground.

He needed to make a noise, any loud noise, to get the dinosaur’s attention. But what? He cast around, looking for something to beat on a wall. But it would mean getting off the horse. Get off, and he might never get back on again.

The solution was obvious. He pulled on the horse’s reins, drawing it up into a rearing pose. It expelled a loud whinny.

The dinosaur turned to face the noise, face him. The dinosaur locked eyes on him. It grunted, and Bryan thought he recognized him. His insides turned to water. The monster lowered its head, and its eyes became slits. It drew its leg back and forth, stroking the earth, like a bull before it pounced. Bryan didn’t need so many obvious signals, but he took heed of them in any case.

He turned the horse around and galloped. The dinosaur roared, the thud of its heavy footsteps a reminder of how close the dinosaur was. It was fast and kept pace with the horse. Bryan was surprised. He had no idea how fast a T-Rex was, and in hindsight, that seemed an obvious problem they should have thought of before. After all, if a T-Rex was too fast, how could they expect to outrun it?

And it was too fast. It was gaining.

The rumble of its feet on the hard packed dirt roads was thunder in Bryan's ears. Bryan shivered. He rocked his body back and forth, having to push the horse faster than he expected. It was no good.

He couldn't outrun the beast in a straight line, and though the exit beckoned to him just ahead, he knew he wouldn't make it, at least, not in a single piece. He pulled sharply on the reins and steered the horse left, around a corner and onto a side street.

It would buy him some time, he hoped, and with any luck-

The large house on the corner exploded like it had been set off with dynamite. Amidst the flying rubble and dust, a huge pair of muscular legs pumped hard, green and bleeding across its giant knees.

The dinosaur wasn't smiling, of course—Bryan wasn't even sure if a such a creature was capable of smiling—but to Bryan's eyes that was exactly what it was doing.

Bryan focused on the task in hand. He needed to double back on himself, head back toward the entrance, but he daren't turn left with the monster right on his heels.

But he couldn't afford to waste time either. Who knew how long a horse lasted running at this pace? He decided to take the risk. He shut his eyes and said a quick prayer.

He led his horse down a narrow alley, and then, once inside, took another immediate left. The building to his left exploded, the shards rapping against him, shards as big as his head. He raised his elbow to protect himself. The horse whinnied and shifted to the right.

A huge head came out of the destroyed building like a wraith, its tongue lashing like a whip toward Bryan, but he didn't slow. He didn't dare. He felt the slime on the tip of its tongue slide across his cheek.

A large green snake, similar in size to a fallen tree, came rushing toward him. It was the creature's tail, of course. Bryan reacted the same way whether it was a snake, tree or tail, and took the horse over it with a

prowess of skill he didn’t know he had. He pushed the horse on. He was home free!

He got to the end of the alleyway and entered the main street. He turned right, heading toward the open gates. This part of town was silent. Bryan feared, as he always did, that an impediment would emerge at any moment, blocking him off and making it impossible for him to pass.

But it didn’t happen. He passed through the gate. He allowed the horse to slow, but he didn’t stop till he was a reasonable distance from the gate on a flat grassy plain.

Bryan leaned forward and slapped the horse comfortingly on the neck. It was covered in sweat, steam rising off it, nostrils flared, its breath hoarse.

Bryan turned his head to the side to listen for heavy footfalls, but heard none. There was no sign of the lumbering beast. That didn’t mean the creature wasn’t there, stalking, waiting for Bryan to come back through the gates. The monster had already proven he was a smart and thoughtful hunter.

The horse’s footfalls were loud and heavy on the drawbridge. It was a welcoming sound, the sound of freedom. Bryan crossed to the other side of the moat and turned the horse around.

The gates stood empty. There were no loud thudding footsteps, no growls or roars. Where was the beast? Dare he head back to see if it was there? He needed to make sure it followed him. But was the monster now setting his own trap by drawing Bryan to him?

Bryan had no choice. He had to go back.

# 51.

DESPITE ALL Lady Maltese's knowledge, there were certain things she simply could not reproduce with the level of technology at her disposal. High technology required the investment and development from thousands of individuals, not just one. No matter how brilliant that one person might be, there was no way she could replicate the level of technology the surface had.

But she could try. And she had.

She wanted to build a camera to attach to the top of the T-Rex's head for better control. For what could be bought for a few dollars in any store on the surface you couldn't even dream of reproducing in this world.

She could hear the roar of her beloved Rexy. She had learned over the years to read her pet's agonized groans, the way its roar soared or fell, its delicate intonation. It couldn't be described as a language, but it did convey meaning. In many ways, vocal communication was better than a camera. She recognized a cry of disappointment when she heard one.

It could only mean Rexy had failed to snap up one of the family members. Rexy was like that. He didn't like to lose what he felt belonged to him. He was highly territorial.

The former Lady Maltese decided to give her pet a gift, as part of her latest upgrade. She picked up her amulet and pressed the big ruby button. At least there were some things she was still capable of reproducing in this world. She grinned, chuckled with a half maniacal grin, and then turned and ran into the caves.

# 52.

THE SKELETAL warriors were not difficult to engage, but they were difficult to kill. They were unlike anything Rosetta had ever fought before. Removing your opponent’s head tended to put a dampener on their attack, but with the skeletons it didn’t make any difference.

That was why she didn’t bother to decapitate them or slice through their limbs any longer—they would only keep attacking anyway, and judging by the number of dead and injured locals on the floor, that was precisely what had happened. They’d sliced off an undead’s head, only for it to then continue at them. In their shock the skeletons had the perfect opportunity to strike their enemies down.

Too many locals had fallen to the skeletons, and Rosetta was not about to let more die than need be. She thrust her metal arm into every rotting chest cavity she came to, and tore out their beating mechanical hearts.

But they were fighting a losing battle. For every skeleton they killed, another two were ready to take its place. Their only saving grace was the limited width of the great hall, otherwise the skeletons would have surrounded them and hacked them to pieces.

Despite everything Rosetta had been through, despite finally finding Bryan and his family, she had managed to speak just a few words with him. Now she was about to die here, in what looked like the Hogwart’s dining room.

# 53.

IT WAS just then, a moment too late, after Lady Maltese had pressed her ruby button that Cassie brought her cudgel down for the antennae's killing blow. The George and dragon statue slid off the roof and clattered to the stony ground, flipping end over end.

The skeletal soldiers stood stock still for a moment before collapsing on the ground, in a pile. The townspeople began emerging from the great hall almost immediately afterwards. One sported a robot arm. Rosetta. She blinked into the light.

Cassie began to lower herself back down using the rope. She got to the window, Aaron ready to help her back inside. It wasn't a few seconds later when there was a great roar somewhere to the west of the city.

This roar wasn't of fury or desperation, but of pain, Cassie thought. Then there was a great creaking and buffeting noise, like someone was waving a huge fan. Cassie thought she caught sight of a shadow rising into the clouds, but it was gone just as soon as she turned toward it. She let the image of the rising shadow enter her mind. She played it over and over, trying to work out its features.

"What?" Aaron said. "What is it?"

"We have to get out of here," Cassie said, her voice haunted. "Nowhere is safe."

# 54.

BRYAN APPROACHED the gates cautiously, his stallion's hooves clip clopping on the drawbridge. The gate was big, built to be impressive, but did not provide the best view of what lay inside.

The dinosaur could have been right around the corner and he wouldn't have known. If it came at full tilt Bryan wasn't sure he'd be able to get his horse to run fast enough in the opposite direction, and so he approached slowly.

He leaned forward, hands clasped tight around the reins, and peered around the corner. He felt relieved when he found nothing there but empty streets in either direction. He felt nervous. If it hadn't chased him, where had it gone? To the castle? To the great hall? To the inventor's tower?

Bryan eased off the reins to lead the horse into a gallop. When he stopped, he heard a loud fluttering noise like an old airplane's rotor blades warming up. It was getting closer. Bryan was growing nervous, his horse skittish. He didn't blame it. He didn't like it either.

"Woah there, boy," Bryan said, slapping it reassuringly on the neck.

The horse did not relax. It whinnied and backed up. Something was spooking him. He reared up onto his powerful back legs and it was then, with his eyes rising to the sky, that Bryan saw what the horse must have sensed.

A dark shadow descended from the protection of the thick mist-like clouds, a pair of enormous flapping shadows on either side of it.

Bryan's heart froze in his chest, eyes as wide as dinner plates.

They hadn't thought of this. How could they? They didn't know the beast could fly. They had mistaken the metal box on its back for a shield, but it wasn't a shield. It was an extendable pair of wings. Their plan now seemed ridiculously naive. Things had just gotten a whole lot more complicated.

The T-Rex fell the final twenty feet, tucking its wings behind itself, and hit the ground, making it shake, like thunder. It took the full force with its two powerful hind legs. Its wings were huge and arched, having opened up from what they had previously mistaken for body armor.

The dinosaur threw back its head and let out a roar that would have sent a pride of lions packing. It glared at Bryan, licked its lips with a badly blistered tongue, the smoldering fire within already red hot.

# 55.

WHERE HAD Bryan gotten to? He was meant to bring the dinosaur to her so she could continue leading it to the trap, where it would eat, get caught, and they could deal with it later.

It also meant the kids and Rosetta—speaking of whom, how in God's name had she managed to get there by herself?—would be able to join them in the caves so they could search for the Passage and get out of there.

By then, they would have done more than enough to help the locals of this town, to whom they owed no particular loyalty. In fact, they had probably done more than the locals deserved. They had treated the family with suspicion the whole time they were here, and blamed them for everything that had gone wrong.

Despite the creature comforts, Zoe couldn't wait to leave this place. It was too small minded and set in its ways. Zoe wasn't exactly 'normal' (whatever that meant) on the surface. She did not believe everything she read in the newspapers, and did not subscribe to widely held beliefs because, as history had shown, whatever the majority of people agreed on and thought was correct, was almost always wrong.

Where had that man gotten to? Zoe thought. He should have been there by now. More than a finger of concern had wormed its way into her heart. There were too many things that could have happened. Zoe refused to give any of them time nor credence. She would know what happened when she knew. There was nothing she could do if something had happened in any case, and she couldn't leave where she was camped now for fear Bryan would eventually turn up.

She heard the familiar soft clip clopping noise of horse hooves coming toward her.

"It's about time!" Zoe said.

But the irritation died on her lips when she saw the horrified expression on Bryan's face.

# 56.

“WHAT DID you see?” Aaron said.

Cassie had been silent ever since she came down from the roof, having destroyed the antennae. Despite Aaron’s repeated enquiries, she hadn’t yet responded to his question.

“We have to get out of here,” Aaron said. “Mother and Bryan will be waiting for us at the caves.”

Cassie shook her head.

“No,” she said. “They won’t. They’ll be dead.”

“What are you talking about?” Aaron said.

“The T-Rex,” Cassie said. “It really is a dragon. It has wings. It can fly. And it breathes fire. It’s a dragon.”

“It can fly?” Aaron said.

He took a seat, suddenly feeling light headed.

“Yes,” he said. “That changes things.”

“We’ll never get to the caves while that thing is flying overhead,” Cassie said. “It’ll burn us to a crisp before we even get to it.”

“Then what are we going to do?” Aaron said. “We can’t just sit here. It’s going to come back and get us eventually. Especially with all the dead bodies and the locals in the great hall. What are we going to do?”

“I’m thinking,” Cassie said.

Footsteps came running up the spiral staircase.

“Kids, we have to go find your parents,” Rosetta said.

“No,” Cassie said. “We have to do more than that. We have to save them.”

“From the dragon?” Rosetta said. “How?”

Aaron was looking at Jeffrey’s stash of inventions. There was a pile of weapons on the table beside a stack of white backpacks.

“I have an idea,” Aaron said.

# 57.

THIS WHOLE time Bryan had been working diligently to get the dinosaur to follow him so they might trap it, when the whole time the dinosaur had a secret on its back, and now they found themselves on the backfoot.

Bryan ran the horse hard, and when the dragon disappeared into the thick clouds overhead, Bryan had no choice but to rush into the forest, to hide himself as best he could. He changed direction and headed right, running through the forest closest to the town walls, but far enough inside the woods that the dragon would not see him from above.

The dragon came out of the sky like the harbinger of death, and breathed a hot bolt of flame that fell upon the forest, scoring a line through it. Burnt woodland and charcoal filled Bryan's nostrils. He never stopped, and only pushed the horse harder.

The woodland would catch fast, and there would be nothing for it but to break cover. The moment Bryan did that, the dragon would be on him. The dragon held all the cards.

Bryan saw Zoe the moment he ascended a steep hill. She was waiting for him on the other side.

"It's about time!" Zoe said.

Her expression changed the moment she laid eyes on him.

"What is it?" she said.

The trees burned and crackled in Bryan's wake, working its way up the incline.

"You started a fire?" Zoe said. "What did you think that would achieve?"

"It might keep us warm," Bryan said. "I didn't start it. Our reptile friend did."

"What are you even doing in the woods anyway?" Zoe said. "You should have steered clear of it, working your way around to the front, and then entering so I could come out."

There was a roar overhead, and a black shadow flitted behind the clouds.

"Oh," Zoe said.

They turned their mounts and trotted through the forest, keeping a step ahead of the fire.

“This is great,” Zoe said. “Since when could it fly?”

“All along, apparently,” Bryan said. “That was what the metal armor on its back was for. To unfold once the right button was pressed.”

“So the antennae is still working too,” Zoe said.

“Apparently,” Bryan said. “Though the dinosaur never attacked the inventor’s tower. He came close though.”

“At least we know the kids are okay,” Zoe said. “And they’re far from all this.”

A bell rang, high pitched and clanging.

“What’s that?” Bryan said.

“It’s the church bell,” Zoe said. “It’s ringing.”

“It’s a bit late,” Bryan said. “The town has been half destroyed by hordes of skeletons and a fire breathing T-Rex with wings.”

“Maybe it’s not a warning bell,” Zoe said.

“What do you mean?” Bryan said. “What else could it be?”

Zoe rode forward, in the direction of the town.

“You’re going the wrong way!” Bryan said.

Zoe didn’t stop. Bryan trotted after her. Zoe pulled up on the fringes of the woodland. She squinted at the church bell tower in an effort to see clearer.

“Someone’s up there,” Zoe said.

“Of course someone’s up there,” Bryan said. “The bell is ringing.”

“No one needs to be on the roof to ring the bell,” Zoe said. “That’s what the bell ropes are for. They’re setting something up.”

“What do you think it could be?” Bryan said.

“I’m sure I don’t know,” Zoe said. “But we’d best hope it’s something that’ll work. Our plan is a failure.”

The fire *woof*ed. It was really tearing through the forest now. They didn’t have long to make a decision.

“The dragon is expecting us to race across the plain toward the caves,” Zoe said. “It’s the only place where he can’t reach or hurt us. The monster might not know much, but it knows that.”

“Yes,” Bryan said, though he didn’t look much enthused by the idea. “I suppose we’d better head back into town. I just hope we can make it back.”

“By ringing the bell, they’re hoping to get the dragon’s attention,” Zoe said. “But it won’t leave here till it has us. It knows it has us on the ropes.”

“I sure hope whoever is on the roof of the church knows what they’re doing,” Bryan said.

# 58.

“WHAT ARE we doing?” Cassie said. “We must be crazy to attempt something like this.”

“It’s the only shot we’ve got,” Aaron said.

“Speaking of shots, one is about all we’ll have,” Cassie said. “As soon as that thing is above us, it’ll blast us with its breath and there will be no chance we’ll escape. We’ll have to be up here to fire the net too. We’ll need a way to get down quickly.”

“Don’t worry,” Aaron said. “I’ve got us covered.”

“So let me get this right,” Rosetta said. “You’re ringing this bell to get the dragon’s attention. When it comes in close to investigate, you’re going to fire your giant crossbow and try to knock it out of the sky. And we will probably only have one shot because the dragon will hit us with its fire breath as soon as it knows we’re here.”

“That’s about it, yeah,” Aaron said.

“And this is the best idea we have?” Rosetta said.

“Pretty much, yes,” Aaron said.

Rosetta thought for a moment.

“Okay,” she said. “At least it’ll make one hell of a eulogy.”

“If we fail, there won’t be any eulogies for anybody,” Aaron said.

“Way to increase the pressure,” Rosetta said, rolling her eyes. “If we fail, everyone in this world is dead. Have I got that about right?”

“Spot on,” Cassie said.

“And to think last week I was worried about my quarterly review,” Rosetta said.

She bent down to pick up the giant crossbow.

“Where do you want this?” she said.

“Right here is fine,” Aaron said.

Rosetta braced herself against the wall and used her robot arm to move the giant crossbow frame. It was pointed in the direction of the forest, now a burning blaze, at the dragon that continued to rain fire down on the woodland.

Rosetta hoped Bryan and Zoe were okay. If they were in the caves, they were safe.

“Will this kill it?” Rosetta said.

“We don’t need to kill it,” Aaron said. “We just need to knock it out of the sky.”

# 59.

THE MOMENT their horses shot from the safety of the smoldering forest, a roar erupted from the dragon as it circled around and took off into the clouds for cover. There was perhaps a minute of uninterrupted silence before the rattling of metal wings above, and the scream of a haggard shard of metal that caught the wind and made it howl.

The town entrance was getting larger in their vision, the drawbridge drawing up close. The horses seemed to understand the situation and were giving it everything they had, a thick white liquid foaming up on their bodies.

“We’re not going to make it!” Bryan said.

“Yes we will!” Zoe said. “Keep going!”

The dinosaur roared, deafening. It must have been right on top of them. Any moment those roars would turn into the roars of fire, blasting them to charred smithereens.

The horses’ hooves thudded on the drawbridge. The riders pulled on their reins, turning the horses hard left. The wood splintered as the fire blasted through it, cutting a sharp line in the dirt road, narrowly missing the riders by inches.

The dragon had to pull up and make a U-turn to head back toward the riders, who were already hustling through the streets toward the church.

High above them, getting into position, was Rosetta, Aaron and Cassie, preparing to take a single shot that would either save them, or destroy them.

# 60.

“HE’S COMING,” Aaron said, spying the large black shape coming toward them.

“What makes you think it’s a him?” Rosetta said. “It could just as easily be female.”

“Sexist pig,” Cassie said with a wink at Rosetta.

Aaron blushed red. Rosetta’s plan was to get their minds off the task in hand as much as possible. People always performed better when they weren’t focused entirely on the task in hand.

It was one of the most valuable lessons Rosetta had learned in the military, to absorb and soak in as much information as possible, and then to let go, for the unconscious mind to take over. It was a supercomputer, and one of the ways to engage it was to let all tension and stress go, for the mind to take possession of the body. It was as much for herself as it was for the kids. She needed to relax.

*What I wouldn’t give for a nice hot bath and some delicious red wine right about now,* Rosetta thought.

That thought alone helped her to relax. She felt the muscles around her shoulders unwind. There had been no time to fashion a trigger. Instead, she wielded a hatchet. She would sever the rope and send the net they had locked and loaded spiraling out into the sky toward the large flapping monster.

It was going to be a tough shot. Fire too early and the monster would see it coming and avoid it. Worse, it would be a smaller target and harder to hit. Fire too late, and the net would have less effect, not having the time to unfurl and trap the monster.

She needed to be patient. She would prefer for the monster to be too close than too far away. At least then she might hit it and have some effect, rather than none at all.

Rosetta got to her feet and squinted at a pair of dust clouds rising, tearing up a trail leading toward the church.

“It’s them,” Rosetta said.

“Who?” Aaron said.

“Your parents,” Rosetta said.

They were coming right for the church, bringing the dragon toward them. The dragon had eyes only for them, and swooped in above the houses, barely pulling its legs up out of the way as it passed over the roofs. It was coming in low and fast, its chest already puffing up to expel fire.

The two horses were in the firing line, the dragon coming up behind them. No way they were going to escape. Bryan and Zoe were putting all their eggs in one basket with this maneuver, putting their lives in their hands. In Rosetta, Cassie and Aaron’s hands.

*That* really *lessens the tension*, Rosetta thought. *If I shoot and miss, I’ve just made Aaron and Cassie orphans.*

Rosetta’s hand felt sweaty on the hatchet handle. She gripped it tighter. The dragon’s head pulled back.

The horses were giving it all they had, fighting a losing battle, Zoe and Bryan’s arms working the horses’ heads hard.

Rosetta raised her axe high and…

Swung it down.

She couldn’t say she was ‘at one’ with the axe, but they had aimed the crossbow as best they could. The axe’s sharpened edge sliced through the rope in one smooth motion. The rope shot forward, sending the net package out, spiraling through the air.

The fire rumbled in the dragon’s mouth. It must have heard or seen the net because at the last moment it looked up. It grunted as the net, having unwound to its full width and height, snapped around the dinosaur.

“Yes!” Rosetta said.

The net couldn’t snap the wings together like it did the monster’s legs, but it did hold them in place, freezing them. Aaron and Cassie cheered, arms held up in celebration.

And then Aaron lowered his arms, his smile fading.

Rosetta turned to look at what had dampened his spirit.

Before losing its ability to fly, the dragon had been accelerating fast. Its hefty weight was still carrying it forward, its wings, unable to move, worked as a glider.

It was going to strike the ground, but not before it hit the church tower.

# 61.

ZOE AND BRYAN pulled hard on their reins, each taking a different direction. They'd been aware the dragon was close, but they were also aware that whatever weapon was atop the church tower, it had to be something Cassie and Aaron were confident would take the dragon down.

Their horses were shot and couldn't run much farther. The foam on their bodies was thick like frothing shampoo gel. They brought their loyal steeds to a slow stop, and didn't turn back to look at what the dragon's fate had been until they heard the cacophonous smash of the dragon as it sailed into the ground.

What gripped both the parents' hearts was the gentle tinkle of the church bell as it was knocked off its stand and fell to earth.

They rounded the corner, appearing back on the main street. They climbed from their horses and let them go. The horses took off at a canter, not wanting to be part of the adventure any longer.

Bryan and Zoe ran along the street. The dust was still settling and hung thickly over the scene like a shroud. As it began to clear, they made out a long indentation in the road where the dinosaur had fallen, its body tearing up a deep trench.

And then they came to the prostrate dinosaur body, the net tight and making deep furrows in its thick flesh.

There was a large empty space where the church should have been. Where the kids should have been.

The dragon was not dead, and grunted under its heavy restraints, the netting keeping its mouth shut. Its eyes found Bryan and Zoe and focused on them.

There was a real intense hatred in those eyes. It wanted them, wanted them with every fiber of its being. It tried to spit fire, but its lips couldn't open wide enough. Smoke whispered from its nostrils.

The parents moved around the monster, carefully placing their feet. They didn't want to come within range of the great reptile. It was still dangerous. A single thrash of its tail could spell the end of them. Just as it had been the end of the kids.

There was nothing but rubble left of the church. The bell had a crack in it, and the ancient stonework had been destroyed.

“We failed,” Zoe said. “We saved the town, but failed to save our kids. We failed them.”

Bryan hugged Zoe close. It was so painful a loss he couldn’t bear to even look at Zoe right then. They hugged one another, tears streaming down their faces. They had lost them. After all this time, there was nothing they could do to keep hold of them, to keep them from death’s jaws.

There was a fluttering sound. It could have been an angel’s wings. Zoe and Bryan spun around to look at the T-Rex. Had it gotten itself free, and was now working on getting itself airborne again? But no. It was still in the sorry state it had been when it had crash landed.

Their attention moved to the sound above their heads. And there it was. The cause. Three of them. They were descending on clouds of white, all three of the surfacers: Aaron, Cassie and Rosetta. They touched down heavily to the rubble. Zoe and Bryan were on hand to help them to their feet.

“I thought I’d lost you… again!” Zoe said.

“I guess that one never wears off, does it?” Aaron said with a smirk.

“One of these days you’ll be gone and I won’t even blink!” Zoe said.

“Till you realize we really are gone that time,” Aaron said.

Zoe laughed, but it turned to tears.

“Mom, I was only joking,” Aaron said.

“I know,” Zoe said. “I just never want to lose you.”

She hugged him to her, running her hands through his hair and clutching him tight. Bryan hugged Cassie. He caught Rosetta’s eye and smiled.

“Thank you,” he said.

“It should be me thanking them,” Rosetta said. “If it wasn’t for them I wouldn’t be here.”

# 62.

LADY MALTESE watched from the safety of the balcony of her cave apartment, high in the mountain's wall. She couldn't believe what she had just seen. Her pet, her beloved monstrosity, the one she had kitted out and turned into an even more dangerous beast, had been swatted from the sky. She had heard it land, thudding heavily into the earth like a fallen comet.

She'd immediately moved for her amulet and began pressing buttons, but there was no response, no reply. Nothing. She no longer had control.

She let out a scream that echoed through the catacombs. She took off her amulet and smashed it on the floor. She leapt upon it, crushing it beneath her boots, screaming and crying in the same breath.

Everything she had worked for, everything she had done, had all been destroyed. But she wasn't finished yet. She was in her cave. She would use the resources she had to create more weapons. There was more than one way to destroy a town. She would revert to ancient methods, like poisoning the wells, if she had to.

She turned back to the cavern and began sorting through the piles of metal toys she'd fashioned. They had razor-sharp blades around the bottom and helicopter propellers on the top.

*Let's see how they deal with my little hellion copters*, Lady Maltese thought with a smile.

Something moved behind her. She spun around, withdrawing the knife she kept up her sleeve.

"I know you're there," Lady Maltese said. "You don't spend a lifetime in the shadows without knowing when someone is in them."

There was a pause, and then something began to move. A figure emerged into the light, on the edge of darkness. It was a cowled figure. The one who referred to himself as the Cursed One.

Lady Maltese lowered her knife, her eyes wide and fearful.

"I… I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know it was you."

"Clearly," the Cursed One said. "Judging by the events taking place outside, you have a great deal on your plate."

"I do," Lady Maltese said. "But nothing I can't handle."

“No?” the Cursed One said. “It looks like you’ve lost control of the situation to us.”

“No,” Lady Maltese said. “I can get it back. I can always get it back.”

The Cursed One extended his gloved hands in an apologetic gesture.

“But what business is it of ours?” he said. “You may conduct your business any which way you like. What may be seen as a failure to us may be seen as a supreme success to others.”

“It’s *not* failure,” Lady Maltese said vehemently. “It’s a setback.”

“Of course,” the Cursed One said.

Lady Maltese could practically taste the bitterness in his voice.

“But your… setback has put a wrinkle in our plans,” the Cursed One said. “You were meant to join us. We have been recruiting from all known worlds. You alone were entrusted with our pods, but one was stolen and destroyed. And so your spot is gone.”

“I don’t want a spot,” Lady Maltese said. “I want to stay here and rule.”

The Cursed One paced up and down the modest cave apartment, furnished with some of the finest items from the castle.

“Some time ago we came to you with a proposition,” he said. “You required a problem, and we provided you with one. It was up to you to make the most of it. You were told that later, one day, you would pay us back. And we returned.”

Lady Maltese remembered the night.

It had felt colder than usual, the dark full of more fear than she was used to. The darkness had moved and the Cursed One presented himself. He had come to call in the favor she owed him. Lady Maltese had braced herself, ready for it to be something she did not want to give.

Then he surprised her.

“I want a submersible built,” he’d said. “Twenty-five to be exact. They will travel underwater at great depth. They will be fitted with a weapon capable of anti-grav capacity.”

Lady Maltese took a moment to comport herself. It had been a while since she had needed to use the creative part of her brain.

“Although the submersible could be built, the weapon would be impossible,” she’d said. “Anti-gravity technology will not have reached that level of sophistication yet, and I would never be able to reproduce it.”

The Cursed One’s face was covered, but Lady Maltese could hear the smile in his voice.

“All necessary materials will be provided,” he’d said. “You need only design the craft blueprints and build the weapons once we have provided you with the requisite material.”

Lady Maltese agreed, and got to work designing the pods immediately. She drafted and redrafted until they were perfect. Once she was done, she went over them again until she could not see a single flaw with them. She did not want to fail the Cursed One.

The Cursed One was evidently in no great hurry. It was then Lady Maltese realized she had been given no deadline to create the design. It made no difference. She always worked on designs immediately. Always had done. It was her process. Then she realized with mounting dread that perhaps that was the reason for why the Cursed One had left her alone. He knew how she worked.

One day, perhaps six months after the Cursed One had made his demands, he returned. He came with a material he described as ‘Gravitas’. He left her with it and took the designs away with him. He left her to experiment with the material by herself.

It was extraordinary.

Lady Maltese had placed the material on a table and watched as every other object in the room rolled toward it, gaining in speed until they attached themselves to the rock. Lady Maltese was flabbergasted.

This was not possible, and yet here it was before her, working. She had never encountered a material like this her whole life, had never even dreamed such a thing might exist. But yet here it was.

Shaping it had been simple. It was rock, and any mason could have done it. Lady Maltese had the best mason in their world work on it under the pretense it was for her husband’s fortieth birthday.

The real difficulty came with controlling the power, either by enhancing it, or reducing it when required. She stumbled upon the rock’s greatest ability by accident, almost knocking her unconscious in the process.

She had managed to reverse the polarization. Not only could she use the rock to draw objects toward herself, but also repel objects away. It was a breakthrough that would help control the pods the weapons were attached to.

In a single stroke, it would not only operate as a weapon, but as a defence too—by repelling and pushing away any objects or weapons

hurled at it. It would allow the driver to operate the pod more efficiently and with greater control.

What the Cursed One wanted these pods for, Lady Maltese didn't know. She refused to even speculate. She kept her head down and focused on the job in hand. She couldn't wait for their dealings to be over. The Cursed One gave Lady Maltese goosebumps.

The second part of their deal was for her to store the pods in the caves while she attached the weapons.

"We had an agreement," the Cursed One said.

"I have carried out my side of the bargain to the best of my abilities," Lady Maltese said.

"Then you have not carried them out adequately," the Cursed One said. "You were to store the pods for safe keeping until we needed them. And for your failure to comply, you must be punished."

Lady Maltese lashed out with the knife. It was a fast and vicious blow. The Cursed One clutched his throat, blood pulsing out over his black gloves.

Lady Maltese was panting, not with exertion, but shock and surprise. She had never thought she could vanquish the Cursed One so easily. She smiled, a mad maniacal grin that stretched from one ear to the other. She had won! She had killed him! She let out a girlish squeal of glee and wrapped her hands around her mouth.

The Cursed One was not as unassailable as she had thought. He was just a man. And all the nightmares she had had about him over the years, him as a dark and evil spirit—clearly some of their world and its superstitions had rubbed off on her—had all been for nought. He was just a man. Nothing but a piddling nothing of a man.

Lady Maltese gasped, a sharp intake of breath. She reached behind herself, for what she felt—a painful pinch just under her ribs. She'd backed herself right onto it, whatever it was.

She found something was protruding from her body, something alien that did not belong there. She reached back and pulled it out. She felt the pain and ejection of her warm blood. She let out a cry and raised the blade to her face.

It was her own blade.

*No,* she thought. *It can't be. I dropped it. I dropped it right there…*

She looked at the floor, at the spot her blade should have been and found… nothing. Nothing protruded from the shadows on the floor. Her blade had been taken and then held at her back so she might impale herself onto it. Which meant someone must have held it for her to impale herself on in the first place.

She spun, her hands coming around to form fists. She screamed when she saw the one who had stabbed her. It was the Cursed One.

“No,” Lady Maltese said. “You’re dead. I slashed open your throat. Your drops of blood are still on the flagstone floor.”

“You cannot kill what is everlasting,” the Cursed One said. “When we carry weapons to protect ourselves, we are actually carrying the very tools that condemn us.”

Lady Maltese dropped her dagger. The Cursed One moved fast, like a striking snake, caught the knife before it hit the ground, and tossed it at Lady Maltese. But it was a bad throw, and it missed her.

Lady Maltese took a moment to comport herself. If the Cursed One could make mistakes, perhaps there was a way out of this for her.

“We can make a new agreement,” Lady Maltese said. “One of mutual benefit to us both.”

“We do not renegotiate,” the Cursed One said.

He stepped into the light. Lady Maltese instinctively stepped back, matching his forward momentum. She flinched again. This time she did not need to look back at what she had walked into.

She stepped forward and spun around, and in doing so, the knife—her knife—that had punctured her body on the other side, was removed. It dripped dark red with her blood.

Another figure stepped from the shadows, another Cursed One. Identical to the first two.

“You cannot kill what does not exist in a single body,” the third Cursed One said.

Lady Maltese was beginning to feel weak with loss of blood. She was bleeding badly from the two wounds to her person. Her dress was becoming heavy. She turned to run for the door. Anything was better than where she was and what was going to happen to her if she didn’t escape.

She caught sight of a glint of light off her blade as it spun through the air and disappeared into the shadow in front of her. She skidded to a halt, but not fast enough, as her own blade was caught and protruded from the

darkness. Her body slid slowly and painfully onto it, like a hot knife into butter.

Another Cursed One stepped forward.

“You cannot kill what cannot be killed,” he said.

It was over. She was not going to survive.

“This is impossible,” Lady Maltese said.

“Everything is impossible until you know how to make it possible,” the Cursed One said.

The Cursed One took the blade and sliced it across the palm of his hand. His blood mingled with hers on the edge of the knife.

“As you have taken one of our number from us, I’m afraid you must take his place,” the Cursed One said. “A pity—for you. You could have avoided this with death. Instead, you will become one of us.”

He sliced open one of Lady Maltese’s cheeks. The wound burned red raw. At first the pain went unnoticed by Lady Maltese in comparison with her other wounds, but as she lay there, and the seconds ticked by, the wound festered and turned her skin black. It raced across her skin like a flood across a great plain.

“What… did you do… to me?” Lady Maltese said. “What did… you do?”

Her skin turned coal black and reached her lips. She could no longer speak. Her eyes rolled back, her vision turning dark. All was black.

# 63.

AFTER BURYING the dead, it took the whole town five days to search every tunnel of the cave. Their search found nothing, besides the weird twisted machine the dragon had used to skin his victims, a device the butchers of the town found very useful to prepare their own meat products.

Everything else, if there had been anything else, was gone. Even the pods that had stood in a long row were gone. Most important of all, despite searching every inch of the caves, there was no Passage to be found.

Roland, after taking up his father's mantle, promised to search them again once they had rebuilt the town. Bryan suspected it was going to be a waste of time, but he didn't say anything.

Lord Maltese never fully recovered from the shock of his wife's misdemeanors. He was a shell of the man he had been, mumbling under his breath and constantly lost in a daze.

The metal of Lady Maltese's other machines was repurposed and reforged into a giant muzzle that kept the T-Rex's jaws restrained. Bryan was able to build a new antennae and remote control device. The T-Rex became more sedate after that. The locals still needed to be persuaded the dragon wasn't some kind of mystical being.

There was one discovery the family did not overlook.

"Oh my God," Zoe said. "Bryan. Look at this. It's the same figure."

Bryan looked with the air of someone who didn't believe what he was hearing, his eyes drooping at the corners. When he laid eyes on the image, a visible shiver went through him.

"I think I just peed a little," Bryan said.

"Someone—or something—has been visiting all these worlds," Zoe said. "A black cowled figure. What could it mean?"

"Who could it be?" Cassie said.

"I'm sure I have no idea," Zoe said. "But he must have been coming here for quite some time if it is the same guy."

They all peered at the black cowled figure scrawled on the cave wall, a million and one possibilities going through their minds. None of them could prepare them for the truth.

ROSETTA and the family spent several days searching the rolling farmland for the Passage until Aaron finally hit upon the solution.

“Lady Maltese had parachutes made, and the dinosaur could fly, so why couldn’t the Passage be on the roof?”

It was crazy, mad, impossible, and yet they found no argument to be made for it not to be so. It turned out to be in the first place they looked: in the center of the world’s roof, like an upside down sink, the hole in the middle.

“Thar she is,” Bryan said.

“The only question is, how do we get up there?” Zoe said.

“Fly, of course,” Cassie said.

It took Bryan two days to teach Roland how to use the remote control device. Bryan had shaped it into a PlayStation controller, assuming it would be more intuitive for him to learn. He turned out to be wrong.

Rosetta and the family climbed aboard the T-Rex dressed in comfortable clothes, armed with a backpack each, full of the finest food from the town. The locals’ way of apologizing for their behavior of late.

The T-Rex growled and threw back its head when it caught sight of the family. The meal that had gotten away. Roland tapped at the controls like a pro. The T-Rex shook its head and turned away.

A set of low chairs had been installed on the T-Rex’s back. It looked pretty flimsy to Bryan. Each chair was set behind a vertebrate.

Roland pressed a button, and the T-Rex coiled up its powerful legs and leapt into the air. They ascended into the sky with a few flaps of the dinosaur’s wings, up to the ceiling. The T-Rex floated on a powerful updraft just below the Passage.

Rosetta and the family each shook Roland and Abigail’s hand and took turns to ascend into the Passage. They were old hands at it by now.

“I wouldn’t send anyone through this Passage just yet,” Bryan said.

“Why not?” Roland said. “It would be good for us to explore.”

“Trust me,” Bryan said, tapping him on the shoulder. “Give it another couple hundred years. Minimum.”

Bryan passed into the Passage. They were gone.

ROLAND pressed at the controls and lowered the T-Rex back to the field beside the town. The T-Rex would be of great use to the people. It could carry heavy weights and aid them in their rebuilding efforts.

Roland mounted his horse and trotted back to the town at a leisurely pace. He thought about the family and everything that had happened in such a short space of time. It shouldn't be forgotten, he decided. But how to ensure the people never forgot?

They could build a statue to the occasion. He shook his head. Statues were too easily destroyed, as they had seen. It would need to be a song. He would get the minstrels to work on one. But no, not everyone could sing well. He wanted *everyone* to recall this story.

Story.

That was what it would be. A tale. A thrilling adventure about a family, a monster, and an evil ruler.

But how to begin such a tome?

He smiled. That was easy. The story would begin the same way so many of the most unforgettable stories began.

Once upon a time…

# Underworld Ascending